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# Author's Note

Welcome to the second book of A Shadow in the Light! If you clicked on this book without reading the first book (Veiled Stars), I highly recommend you read that first. The plot won't make much sense if you do not.

This book will touch topics like death, blood, and mild gore. If there are any very detailed gory scenes, I will put a trigger warning (TW) at the beginning of the chapter and have a summary at the bottom if you skip over the chapter.

If there are any spelling/grammatical errors, please let me know so I can fix it as soon as possible! I tend to mix names up, so those might be very common if it slips past me while editing.

-artemis

# Excerpt

***EXCERPT***

Rose jumped back, fur bristling. She hadn't seen this coming when she was coming out of the healer's den.

"W-Why are you here?" She spat, distancing herself away from him.

"Rose, what's wrong?" Lilac asked, soothingly wrapping her tail around Rose's shoulders. "Do you know Ripple?"

Rose bared her teeth, unwilling to tell her anything. Sootripple - no, Ripple - stared back at her, eyes wide with surprise.

"I haven't seen her before in my life," meowed Ripple, ear flicking, "but perhaps I look like a cat she knows."

Rose's heart hammered against her ribcage like a bird trapped in a cage. Why was he here?

# Allegiances

**THUNDERCLAN**

***LEADER:*** NECTARSTAR - a long-furred, broad-shouldered gold tom with yellow eyes

***DEPUTY:*** HONEYPOOL - a gold tom with warm green eyes

***MEDICINE CAT(S):*** MISTYSONG - a silver tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

***WARRIORS:*** SAGEPOPPY - a long-furred white she-cat with amber eyes

DOEBLAZE - a broad-shouldered dark ginger-and-cream tom with amber eyes

LICHENSTRIKE - a gray tabby tom with moss-green eyes

SWEETBERRY - a pretty cream she-cat with green eyes

CROWSKIP - a dark gray tom with white paws and dark blue eyes

ROOTSPECKLE - a fluffy calico she-cat with green eyes

FALLOWBRIAR - a large ginger she-cat with white paws and dark amber eyes

*(APPRENTICE - STORMPAW)*

LARCHTAIL - a black-and-white tom with sky-blue eyes

*(APPRENTICE - DEWPAW)*

SEEDFALL - a pale gold she-cat with moss-green eyes

BRIGHTCLOUD - a calico she-cat with bright green eyes

*(APPRENTICE - LYNXPAW)*

HOLLYMOON - a muscular black she-cat with green eyes

CLOVERHEART - a fluffy gray tabby she-cat with amber eyes

TURTLECREEK - a fluffy tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes

BUZZARDTUFT - a lanky pale brown tom with amber eyes

*(APPRENTICE - ECHOPAW)*

VIXENHEART - a small tortoiseshell she-cat with leaf-green eyes

FLAMESHADE - a ginger tabby tom with dark green eyes

*(APPRENTICE - BEECHPAW)*

IVYPELT - a pretty white she-cat with dark yellow eyes

WRENCRY - a pale gray tabby tom with a white belly and green eyes

SMOKELIGHT - a silver tom with yellow eyes

PALEFANG - a pale cream she-cat with light amber eyes

*(APPRENTICE - HAZELPAW)*

***APPRENTICES:*** STORMPAW - a silver she-cat with green eyes

ECHOPAW - a light silver she-cat with yellow eyes

DEWPAW - a sleek silver she-cat with bright yellow eyes

LYNXPAW - a pale silver tom with a bobbed tail and green eyes

BEECHPAW - a black she-cat with bright green eyes

HAZELPAW - a tortoiseshell she-cat with dark green eyes

***QUEENS:*** RAVENWHISKER - a black-and-white she-cat with amber eyes

*(Mother to Wrencry's kits; Ryekit and Lizardkit)*

CHERRYFERN - a pretty ginger-and-cream she-cat with white paws and pale blue eyes

*(Expecting Buzzardtuft's kits)*

AQUA - a blue-gray she-cat with white paws and dark blue eyes

*(Mother to Puddle's kits; Puddlekit, Raccoonkit, and Willowkit)*

***KITS:*** RYEKIT - a black-and-white she-kit with amber eyes

LIZARDKIT - a gray tom-kit with green eyes

PUDDLEKIT - a black-and-white she-kit with yellow eyes

RACCOONKIT - a blue-gray she-kit with bright yellow eyes

WILLOWKIT - a black-and-white she-kit with blue eyes

***ELDERS:*** BROKENSHINE - a tortoiseshell she-cat with blind green eyes

APPLEFANG - a dark cream tom with amber eyes

STREAMHOP - a long-furred silver tabby tom with yellow eyes

**WINDCLAN**

***LEADER:*** BEESTAR - a gray-and-white tom with yellow eyes

***DEPUTY:*** ASPENFLOWER - a black-and-white she-cat with sky-blue eyes

*(APPRENTICE - FRECKLEPAW)*

***MEDICINE CAT(S):*** ROWANMASK - a ginger-and-cream tom with

white paws and green eyes

***WARRIORS:*** HERONBERRY - a pale cream tom with green eyes

WASPEYE - a sleek black she-cat with bright yellow eyes

ACORNBERRY - a pale brown she-cat with pale yellow eyes

HORSEWHISKER - a dark gray she-cat with moss-green eyes

BARKWING - a muscular black tom with dark amber eyes

*(APPRENTICE - LIGHTNINGPAW)*

DAWNSTREAM - a silver she-cat with black dapples and dark amber eyes

DUSKFACE - a gold tabby tom with white paws and pale amber eyes

THISTLEMOON - a spiky-furred brown-and-cream she-cat with yellow eyes

LARKCLOUD - a calico she-cat with ice-blue eyes

MOUSEFANG - a short-furred dark gray tom with a paler belly and yellow eyes

GOLDCLAW - a gold she-cat with a white belly and muzzle; lake-blue eyes

OLIVEWISH - a broad-shouldered dark gray tabby she-cat with dark yellow eyes

FEATHERSONG - a sleek silver-and-white she-cat with dark blue eyes

ALDERPELT - a pale ginger she-cat with darker splotches and moss-green eyes

LOWCLOUD - a fluffy cream tom with light amber eyes

KESTRELHEART - a pretty silver she-cat with amber eyes

*(APPRENTICE - VOLEPAW)*

HOLLOWBRANCH - a black-and-white tom with leaf-green eyes

TAWNYHAWK - a dark brown-and-cream tom with yellow eyes

GORSELEAP - a spiky-furred pale brown tom with amber eyes

BLUEPETAL - a gray she-cat with white paws and muzzle; pale blue eyes

LIONSUN - a gold she-cat with green eyes

*(APPRENTICE - CLOUDPAW)*

***APPRENTICES:*** FRECKLEPAW - a dark brown-and-cream tom with green eyes

LIGHTNINGPAW - a dark gray-and-white tom with blue eyes

VOLEPAW - a pale brown tom with yellow eyes

CLOUDPAW - a silver tom with pale yellow eyes

***QUEENS:*** CINDERFALL - a pretty black she-cat with bright amber eyes

*(Mother to Finchfall's kit; Sunkit and foster mother to Tulipfoot's and Mousefang's kits; Scorchkit, Palekit, Meadowkit, and Waterkit)*

***KITS:*** SUNKIT - a brown-and-cream she-kit with bright amber eyes

SCORCHKIT - a ginger-and-cream she-kit with yellow eyes

PALEKIT - a dark gray tom-kit with paler paws and dark green eyes

MEADOWKIT - a dark gray tom-kit with yellow eyes

WATERKIT - a cream she-kit with ginger paws and splotches; moss-green eyes

***ELDERS:*** TWISTEDBIRD - a skinny ginger-and-cream she-cat with yellow eyes

DARKBLOSSOM - a silver she-cat with green eyes

**RIVERCLAN**

***LEADER:*** MARIGOLDSTAR - a gold tabby she-cat with pale green eyes

***DEPUTY:*** STONETHROAT - a gray tom with amber eyes

***MEDICINE CAT(S):*** SOFTFUR - a fluffy cream she-cat with white paws and blue eyes

***WARRIORS:*** SKYBIRD - a silver tabby-and-white she-cat with sky-blue eyes

*(APPRENTICE - RYEPAW)*

HOLLYEAR - a dark brown tom with yellow eyes

LEAFPETAL - a gold tabby she-cat with dark amber eyes

FLAMEPOUNCE - a bright ginger tom with white paws and tail-tip; amber eyes

SUNFUR - a fluffy golden she-cat with green eyes

ROSEFEATHER - a ginger-and-cream she-cat with light green eyes

RAINYFOOT - a messy-furred pale gray tom with black paws and chest; bright yellow eyes

EBONYWISH - a black-and-white she-cat with yellow eyes

NIGHTFALL - a black she-cat with pale yellow eyes

FOXSHADOW - a black she-cat with green eyes

SPARKTHORN - a ginger tabby tom with green eyes

DUSKBLAZE - a muscular gold tabby with green eyes

BEETLEFLIGHT - a blue-gray tom with yellow eyes

LEOPARDSPOTS - a muscular pale gray she-cat with yellow eyes

HAILHOP - a blue-gray tom with bright amber eyes

SWIFTLAKE - a ginger-and-cream she-cat with pale amber eyes

STREAMTAIL - a silver tabby-and-white tom with blue eyes

*(APPRENTICE - LAKEPAW)*

RUSHSTRIKE - a spiky-furred brown tom with light amber eyes

LIZARDFANG - a ginger-and-cream tom with a white belly and sky-blue eyes

TROUTWHISKER - a gray tom with green eyes

WAVEHEART - a silver tabby she-cat with pale green eyes

***APPRENTICES:*** RYEPAW - a cream tom with ginger paws and pale amber eyes

LAKEPAW - a blue-gray she-cat with a white belly and blue eyes

***QUEENS:*** BLUEWING - a blue-gray she-cat with amber eyes

*(Expecting Lizardfang's second litter)*

BRIGHTBLOSSOM - a calico she-cat with green eyes [former loner]

*(Mother to Hollyear's kits; Fishkit, Shadekit, and Poppykit)*

***KITS:*** FISHKIT - a pale brown she-kit with green eyes

SHADEKIT - a dark brown tom-kit with yellow eyes

POPPYKIT - a calico she-kit with light green eyes

***ELDERS:*** THORNPELT - a dark brown tabby she-cat with dark amber eyes

ACORNSKIP - a dark ginger tabby tom with green eyes

FLICKEREYES - a dark silver-and-white tom with one blind blue eye; other is yellow

**SKYCLAN**

***LEADER:*** SNOWSTAR - a pale silver tabby she-cat with green eyes

***DEPUTY:*** WHITEHAWK - a white tom with light amber eyes

***MEDICINE CAT(S):*** MINTLEAF - a brown she-cat with white paws and blue eyes

PUDDLECLOUD - black she-cat with warm yellow eyes

***WARRIORS:*** MALLOWSTREAM - a gold tom with yellow eyes

IVYHEART - a gray-and-white tom with blue eyes

GOLDFROST - a lanky, pretty calico she-cat green eyes

BLIZZARDSHINE - a fluffy white she-cat with sky-blue eyes; deaf in one ear

HAWKFEATHER - a ginger-and-cream she-cat with amber eyes

*(APPRENTICE - ADDERPAW)*

STORMFALL - a large dark silver tabby tom with amber eyes

*(APPRENTICE - SAGEPAW)*

MORNINGFOOT - a calico she-cat with green eyes

SEEDPOUNCE - a ginger-and-cream tom with light green eyes

LIGHTWISH - a blue-gray she-cat with white paws and blue eyes

LILACFUR - a blue-gray she-cat with green eyes

RIVERNOSE - a gray tom with leaf-green eyes

BREEZECREEK - a black-and-white she-cat with amber eyes

*(APPRENTICE - FLYPAW)*

SHADEBRANCH - a tortoiseshell she-cat with yellow eyes

SOOTSPRING - a dark brown tom with pale amber eyes

YELLOWTOOTH - a pale ginger she-cat with green eyes

GORSENOSE - a white tom with green eyes

***APPRENTICES:*** ADDERPAW - a gold-and-white tom with green eyes

SAGEPAW - a white she-cat with cream paws and muzzle; blue eyes

FLYPAW - a gold she-cat with bright green eyes

***QUEENS:*** COTTONLIGHT - a fluffy pale gray tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

*(Mother to Seedpounce's kits; Reedkit, Kestrelkit, Thornkit, and Grasskit)*

***KITS:*** REEDKIT - a ginger-and-cream tom-kit with yellow eyes

KESTRELKIT - a fluffy pale ginger-and-cream she-kit with green eyes

THORNKIT - a pale gray she-kit with light green eyes

GRASSKIT - a gray tabby tom-kit with yellow eyes

***ELDERS:*** JAGGEDFANG - a tortoiseshell she-cat with moss-green eyes

BERRYBLOOM - a blue-gray she-cat with yellow eyes

**SHADOWCLAN**

***LEADER:*** SNAKESTAR - an old dark brown tom with dark amber eyes

***DEPUTY:*** VOLEPOUNCE - a pale brown tom with yellow eyes

***MEDICINE CAT(S):*** TAWNYTHORN - a tortoiseshell-and-cream she-cat with green eyes

*(APPRENTICE - SEEDPAW)*

***WARRIORS:*** KINKBRANCH - a large dark cream tom with amber eyes

ROOTFLOWER - a gold tabby she-cat with white paws and belly; light blue eyes

*(APPRENTICE - MOOSEPAW)*

COALTOOTH - a black-and-white tom with blue eyes

OLIVEPELT - a dark gray tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

*(APPRENTICE - BEARPAW)*

BLOSSOMHEART - a ginger tabby she-cat with amber eyes

*(APPRENTICE - MOUSEPAW)*

DUSTCLOUD - a ginger-and-cream tom with white paws and blue eyes

YARROWNOSE - a white she-cat with pale yellow eyes

GORGEFALL - a cream tom with leaf-green eyes

CRICKETHOP - a small blue-gray tom with amber eyes

LITTLEWISH - a sleek dark blue-gray she-cat with a white belly and yellow eyes

*(APPRENTICE - SHELLPAW)*

ALDERLEAF - a ginger-and-cream tom with amber eyes

SUNNYCLOUD - a sleek calico she-cat with bright green eyes

WRENHEART - a dark gray she-cat with white paws and blue eyes

POOLFOOT - a messy-furred brown-and-white she-cat with blue eyes

DARKSPOTS - a silver tabby tom with yellow eyes

*(APPRENTICE - BATPAW)*

SPOTTEDFLECK - a tortoiseshell she-cat with pale green eyes

EMBERLIGHT - a brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

***APPRENTICES:*** SEEDPAW - a gold she-cat with yellow eyes

MOOSEPAW - a ginger-and-cream she-cat with white paws and chest; sky-blue eyes

BEARPAW - a ginger-and-white tom with pale blue eyes

MOUSEPAW - a gray she-cat with amber eyes

SHELLPAW - a gold-and-white tom with green eyes

BATPAW - a dark gray tom with amber eyes

***QUEENS: [NONE AT THE MOMENT]***

***KITS: [NONE AT THE MOMENT]***

***ELDERS:*** WILLOWFUR - a spiky-furred pale cream she-cat with green eyes

**OUTSIDE OF THE CLANS**

***ROGUES:*** EGRET - a skinny cream she-cat with yellow eyes

ROSEMARY - a gray she-cat with black splotches and green eyes

ASHEN - a gray tabby tom with amber eyes

LILAC - a pale brown-and-white she-cat with blue eyes

MELODY - a calico she-cat with green eyes

*(Mother to Ashen's kits; Wasp, Mud, and Soot)*

WASP - a calico she-kit with green eyes

MUD - a gray tabby tom-kit with green eyes

SOOT - a small gray tom-kit with amber eyes

BREEZE - a silver tom with yellow eyes

POLLEN - a gold she-cat with white paws and blue eyes

ROSEPAW - a fluffy dark ginger she-cat with dark yellow eyes

SOOTRIPPLE - a dark brown tom with light yellow eyes

***LONERS: [NONE AT THE MOMENT]***

***KITTYPETS:*** ANGEL - a pretty white she-cat with leaf-green eyes

HERO - a dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes

# Prologue

***PROLOGUE***

***ROWANMASK | WINDCLAN CAMP***

*Everything had been okay. Rosepaw had* been alive, Tulipfoot had been alive, Rainpaw had been alive, then everything just crashed down on him. And it hurt, it hurt so much. He missed Tulipfoot, his sister, and his apprentice, Rosepaw.

And Rosepaw's death shouldn't hurt so much. But it did.

The only reason he ever tried to distance himself from his apprentice was because he was afraid of losing her. He didn't like the feeling when he lost Acornberry's love, but this feeling was much worse. Acornberry was still alive while Rosepaw and Tulipfoot and Rainpaw weren't.

The grief wouldn't be so bad if Rosepaw had never pushed her way inside of his heart. Every time he snapped at her or bossed her around, he inwardly cringed. He didn't like doing that, but he just wanted to avoid this kind of sorrow. If he acted cold and got her out of his den, he wouldn't be pained so much.

*I should've just accepted her. I loved her as though she was my kit. She died thinking I hated her to the bone.* Rowanmask stared at the two bodies at his paws. *Now I don't even get to say goodbye to her body.* Rosepaw's blood had been spattered on the ground by Rainpaw, but her body had been gone. The cat who found the scene said it seemed the killer had dragged her body away to the border WindClan shared with no one. The patrol lost her scent and the blood had faded gradually.

Kestrelheart's sorrowful wail resonated through camp while he smothered Tulipfoot's and Rainpaw's in lavender.

Hearing his other sister cry out to the world worsened the pain.

He tried to tune her out, but all he could hear were her sobs echoing in his ears.

"My kit! Where is she?" Kestrelheart sobbed outside. Cats tried to comfort the distressed mother while they themselves were grieving, but Kestrelheart kept wailing.

Rowanmask dragged Tulipfoot's body outside first, then Rainpaw's. Cats gathered around tentatively, stunned that they lost three cats yesterday.

Kestrelheart approached Tulipfoot's body, but stopped to the empty space next to Tulipfoot's body. Rowanmask could tell that's where she pretended Rosepaw's body was.

Dawnstream sat next to Kestrelheart, eyes round with sadness. She asked Kestrelheart why she wasn't grieving for Tulipfoot.

"I miss Tulipfoot, but sometimes a mother-daughter bond is stronger-" Kestrelheart broke off, laying down with a whimper and burying her face into Dawnstream's fur.

Rowanmask surveyed the camp clearing, sitting back on his haunches. Cloudpaw and Lightningpaw huddled next to each other, whiskers quivering. Their mother, Feathersong, was much worse than them. She rested her head on her mate's shoulder, Lowcloud, body trembling. Rainpaw's mentor, Thistlemoon, was murmuring sadly about how she was so young and didn't see as much as Thistlemoon anticipated.

Tulipfoot had lots of cats surrounding her. Her mate, Mousefang, Frecklepaw, and Volepaw, Goldclaw, and a few more. Warriors on the sides of camp attempted to comfort the heartbroken cats, but to no avail.

"WindClan." Beestar's booming voice jerked Rowanmask's attention to him. "We have lost three cats in one day. Most shockingly, though, is that two were murdered and one of the bodies are missing, dragged away by the killer mysteriously."

Kestrelheart let out a low wail.

"Be on the lookout for Sootripple, WindClan. I want to bump patrols up to more cats, so five or six cats on every patrol. Do not leave camp alone." Now Beestar's gaze was on Rowanmask. "You must go out with two other warriors."

Rowanmask dipped his head.

"That is all. We will hold a vigil for Rainpaw, Rosepaw, and Tulipfoot, but before that, I think Rainpaw and Rosepaw deserve their full names in StarClan."

*Roselight. I've always had that name for her.* Rowanmask dropped his head sadly. *She always was a bright, cheerful cat, even when I brought her down. The moment she became my apprentice, she drew a smile to my face.*

"Rowanmask, I'm sure you'd like to do the honors of naming Rosepaw." Beestar meowed expectantly.

Rowanmask nodded.

"Rainpaw lived a life too short, but she led a good one." Beestar paused, contemplating. "Rainpaw's warrior name will be Rainmoon. You would've trained her well, Thistlemoon. She was already acting like you; hard-working and thoughtful."

Rowanmask got up, knowing it was his turn.

"Rosepaw was the best apprentice I could ever ask for. She knew her facts and didn't shy away from challenges, even if in the end it ended badly." Rowanmask thought about Tulipfoot.

Rosepaw had tried her best without Rowanmask there, and she had helped Tulipfoot live a little longer. When Rowanmask had gotten there, though, it had been too late. She had lost too much blood. Tulipfoot only had enough time left to give birth to her other kittens before passing away.

"Roselight is her medicine cat name. She was an amazing apprentice."

"She always brought a smile to my face." Duskface spoke up. "I

enjoyed her presence. She definitely gave off some sort of warmth."

Dawnstream, right next to him, nodded in agreement.

The crowd lapsed into a mournful silence after that.

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# Chapter One

***CHAPTER ONE***

***ROSEPAW | WINDCLAN MOORS***

*Everything kept fading in and out* as she was carried (with great caution) by WindClan.

"It'll be alright, young one." A voice Rosepaw couldn't recognize soothed, but it had to be a warrior within her Clan. "Whatever happened to you will be mended."

"Where's Rowanmask..?" Rosepaw slurred, slipping away again just as the cat replied.

***

The next time Rosepaw woke up, she was in the medicine cat den. It looked different, much tinier, but Rosepaw knew it was just her vision being wonky.

"Will I be okay?" A pain she hadn't noticed before made her cry out in pain at the end of her sentence. Her belly burned in pain, but she was too weak to lift her head and look at what was causing it.

The cat in front of her turned to reply, but Rosepaw lost consciousness again.

***

Rosepaw opened her eyes to birdsong, feeling awful.

"Rowanmask?" Rosepaw meowed, looking around the den to the best of her ability. "Rowanmask?"

"Who are you calling for?" A cat's melodic voice scared Rosepaw to the bones. Where was she? Who was this cat?

"Where am I?" Rosepaw tried getting up, only to be stopped by the cat.

"Don't make any fast motions. You might tear the wound open." The cat calmed her back down, gently forcing her to lay back down. "You're in safe paws, though. Don't worry about a thing."

"Where's my Clan?"

"I don't know, but you were found bleeding out so the cats who live here took you here." The cat replied honestly.

"Who are you?"

"Lilac. What is your name?"

"Rosepaw." Her voice became very scratchy. Rosepaw laid her head back down on the fluffy moss bed. "When can I go back to my Clan?"

Several moments of silence passed. Finally, Lilac answered. "I don't know."

Something in Rosepaw said that was a lie, but Rosepaw was too exhausted to pry the information out of Lilac.

"Where are the other cats?"

"Hunting or outside in the base."

"...Base?" Rosepaw queried.

"I suppose you Clan cats call it camp. We call it base because we don't stay in one place forever. We don't have an established camp. But Egret - she rules the base - says we'll have a camp soon." Lilac explained.

Rosepaw had honestly blanked out on whatever Lilac had said, so she just nodded like she heard.

"Rest for now, Rosepaw. Would you like prey?"

Rosepaw nodded weakly, but Lilac thankfully caught her weak motion and said she'd go grab a piece.

Rosepaw's eyes lazily drifted around the den. It was packed and tight, but there was a nice little hole at the top that let sunlight in. Rosepaw noticed one other nest - well, she wasn't too sure if it was a nest. Scraggly moss bits covered the ground and the ground had the impression that a cat laid there quite often. Rosepaw looked at her own nest, which was plump with moss. Did Lilac sacrifice her nest for Rosepaw?

Touched by the action, Rosepaw waited for Lilac to return.

Lilac did return with a cat in tow.

"Rosepaw, this is Egret. Egret, this is Rosepaw."

Rosepaw twisted to look at the two she-cats. Egret was by far more intimidating than Lilac. Despite the obvious lack of food, Egret sported a large frame and cold eyes. Rosepaw didn't know what to say.

"Hello, Rosepaw." Egret meowed.

Rosepaw couldn't tell how she felt, so Rosepaw returned the greeting with the same politeness.

"How do you feel?"

Rosepaw's mouth ran dry. She was honestly frightened right now by this she-cat, but forced herself to say something. Lilac's urging gaze told her to.

"Um, it hurts..."

"What hurts?" Annoyance lined Egret's impatient tone.

Rosepaw wanted to disappear into her nest. "My stomach."

Egret made an acknowledging sound, then turned to Lilac. "How much longer until she can be up and walking?"

Lilac's usual calm voice shook. "Two more days, Egret."

Egret nodded and left without another word.

Lilac hurried over to Rosepaw. "Rosepaw, whenever Egret visits, give her the most exact answer. I'm so sorry for putting you in this position, but now Egret expects you to be walking in two days."

"What if I can't?" Rosepaw cried out. "I can't even stand up yet." Her legs felt so limp, unwilling to move.

Lilac fell into a scary silence. Then, in a feeble whisper, she responded. "She disposes of them. Kills them. This group of mine used to be bigger. Egret used to be an amazing ruler - but after she talked to a Clan cat, she started killing the weak cats." Lilac's voice cracked. "My mate was one. Egret only kept me because I have experience with herbs."

Rosepaw felt awful for Lilac, but didn't know what to say. What kind of place was this? At first, Rosepaw liked it. Once she met Egret, though, everything went downhill.

"Oh, uh, here's your mouse. I'm sorry it's so scrawny. Rosemary and Ashen haven't gone out to hunt recently."

Rosepaw didn't ask who they were. All she knew was that they probably lived in this group and she was content with that information. She ate the mouse fairly quickly.

"Are you comfy?" Lilac began to fret when Rosepaw struggled to bury the bones.

"Yes," she meowed, "just trying to bury these bones."

"I got that." Lilac reassured gently, burying the bones, though she seemed rather confused by the action.

Rosepaw liked Lilac; Lilac reminded her of Kestrelheart, but the warm feeling bubbling inside of her vanished. How was Kestrelheart coping? Her heart felt grasped by claws as she imagined how heartbroken Kestrelheart must be.

"You seem to be in deep thought." Lilac meowed, pulling Rosepaw's attention back to the present.

"I'm thinking about my mother, who probably thinks I'm dead." Rosepaw's whiskers twitched sadly.

Lilac knew she touched a tender subject and fell silent, seeming to be in deep thought as well. "You know," the white she-cat murmured, "you remind me of my kittens."

"You have kits?" Rosepaw perked up.

Lilac's bright eyes dimmed immediately. "Had."

Rosepaw's blood ran cold. "Did... Egret... you know?"

"No." Lilac shook her head firmly. "My two kittens died. One was stillborn and my other one succumbed to a bad sickness. Egret had told me it was probably for the best; my kittens would've been weak members anyway. That's what she said. Never again have I been the same around Egret." Her voice was shaking by now.

"Oh." That's all Rosepaw could manage to say. That was really sad to hear.

"Get some rest. You lost lots of blood." Lilac meowed softly. "I'll be right here if you need me."

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# Chapter Two

***CHAPTER TWO***

***HAZELPAW | THUNDERCLAN CAMP***

*Hazelpaw rolled onto her back,* soaking up the sun. Turtlecreek had told her to get whatever last ounce of sunlight she could get until leaf-bare came. That's when it was always snowy, whatever that meant. Turtlecreek told her it was a fluffy white substance on the ground that fell from the sky. It was cold to touch and made it harder to find prey. Everything about snow seemed unappealing, and Hazelpaw wasn't sure why StarClan would doom them with this white stuff. There seemed to be absolutely no pros about it.

"Life is so good right now." Dewpaw meowed unexpectedly, right next to Hazelpaw with her eyes half-closed.

"It is," agreed Hazelpaw, "until it starts snowing."

Dewpaw snorted. "Who knows, snow may be the best thing ever."

Hazelpaw shrugged to the best of her ability, shoving her shoulder blades into the dirt.

"Where's that flower you seem to adore? I think flowers need sunlight to live." Dewpaw meowed, this time bringing up an unexpected topic.

"I don't *adore* it, and actually, it seems fine in the darkness, so I'll keep it there."

Dewpaw huffed, seemingly out of things to say. She seemed to be coping better ever since Sootripple was gone, but Hazelpaw could tell she was still crestfallen.

"Should we go ask to hunt?" Hazelpaw asked, hoping hunting would take Sootripple's exile off her mind.

Dewpaw looked at her, then back at the blue sky. "Sure, why not."

Hazelpaw rolled onto her paws, padding toward Larchtail since Palefang seemed to not be in camp at the moment. Or Palefang could be sleeping. Her mentor seemed to be growing older by the moment, concerning Hazelpaw. Palefang could finish training her, right? She had grown to like her sarcastic but very compassionate mentor.

"Um, Larchtail?" Hazelpaw caught the black-splotched tom's attention. She grew uncomfortable talking to him; this wasn't her mentor. Thankfully, Dewpaw saved her.

"Can you take us out to hunt?" Dewpaw asked.

Larchtail looked around camp. "Where's Palefang? You both can't hunt. Sootripple may not be done with us."

"We can do team hunting!" Dewpaw and Hazelpaw meowed in sync, then shared a glance, bursting into giggles.

Larchtail nodded, faintly amused. "Let's do that. You two can discuss who'll be the team captain."

Hazelpaw and Dewpaw nodded, before scurrying to the entrance, waiting for Larchtail. He seemed to purposefully take his time.

"Hurry up!" Dewpaw paced back and forth.

Larchtail quickened his pace. "Alright, alright."

The trio raced out of camp, stopping in a small clearing.

"Where do you two want to hunt?" Larchtail asked, licking a paw and drawing it over his face.

"Um... over there." Hazelpaw gestured toward the lake, but Dewpaw gestured to the opposite direction at the same time.

"Work it out." Larchtail smirked when they both looked at him. "Other warriors won't help with these small disputes."

"I'll be team captain." Dewpaw offered immediately.

Hazelpaw had no problem with that and nodded her head vigorously.

"And... we shall hunt by SkyClan's border." Dewpaw announced proudly, probably relishing the feeling of being in charge. She took off in that direction.

"Okay!" Hazelpaw chirped, darting after her sister. Her paws fell quietly but quickly on the forest floor, only disturbing nearby birds when she accidentally crunched leaves. Dewpaw, however, was much noisier, crashing through the undergrowth without a care.

Soon, the two she-cats stopped, the strong scent of SkyClan telling them they were by the border. If Hazelpaw was being honest, she liked SkyClan's scent. Theirs was definitely the best Clan scent, save for ThunderClan.

Dewpaw tasted the air, nose twitching. "StarClan, why can't my nose stop twitching? I probably didn't tell you, but at the Gathering, a ShadowClan apprentice got offended when my nose twitched. I can't help that I don't like the other Clan's smell. I hate all of them - except ThunderClan, of course."

Hazelpaw snickered. "Sounds like you. How'd you explain to the ShadowClan cat?"

"I didn't," mewed Dewpaw bluntly, "I just apologized then we became friends!"

"Also sounds like you."

Dewpaw was about to reply, but her eyes lit up and she circled around, tail lashing. "I smell a squirrel!"

"Let's go get it!" Hazelpaw tasted the air, the faint scent of squirrel wafting into her mouth. Dewpaw led the way, stopping shortly when a squirrel was munching an acorn not too far away.

"Go around the squirrel." Dewpaw ordered quietly. "Scare it to me on my tail signal."

Hazelpaw dipped her head dutifully, going around in a wide half-circle. When she was ready, she peered through the fronds. Dewpaw's tail was raised, then it dropped. Hazelpaw launched herself out of her hiding place, letting out a fearsome growl.

The squirrel squeaked and took off away from her, heading straight into Dewpaw's paws. The squirrel didn't have a chance to react; Dewpaw had already snapped its spine with her jaws. She picked it up, saying something unintelligible to Hazelpaw.

"What?" Hazelpaw frowned.

Dewpaw spat the mouse out. "Good job. We make a great team!"

"We do." Hazelpaw purred. "Let's go find other prey."

***

It was a little before dusk when Larchtail stepped out of his hiding spot, congratulating the two she-cats. They had successfully caught a squirrel, a vole, and two mice. They had unfortunately lost a sparrow, but Dewpaw definitely left it with an injured wing as it had just barely flew away, clearly struggling.

"All of these were impressive catches. I'm glad you two tried to catch a bird despite the fact of never being taught before." Larchtail praised.

"Palefang taught me." Hazelpaw interjected. "I thought Dewpaw knew how to, too. She told me she knew."

Dewpaw looked mildly embarrassed, shuffling her paws.

Larchtail rolled his eyes. "*Dewpaw.*" He sighed her name, exasperated. "Alright, let's go back to camp. Grab your prey."

Dewpaw's shoulders relaxed and she headed towards a tree where the two littermates had buried their prey. Hazelpaw trailed after her, grabbing the squirrel and vole.

Larchtail led them back to camp, dismissing the two apprentices. Hazelpaw dragged her paws to the apprentices den and collapsed in

her nest, drifting away immediately.

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# Chapter Three

***CHAPTER THREE***

***ROSEPAW | UNKNOWN LOCATION***

*Rosepaw woke up groggily, forgetting* about the turn of events that had taken place yesterday. Opening her eyes, she was startled to see a brown-and-white she-cat resting in front of her. Her breath hitched in her throat, until her mind finally remembered what had happened.

"Lilac-" Rosepaw croaked, cutting herself off. StarClan, why did she sound like an *elder*?!

Lilac turned around, noticing her raspy voice. "I'll go get water for you." Lilac meowed immediately, trotting out of the den.

"Wait." Rosepaw's voice didn't travel as far as she had anticipated. Curling up tighter, she waited quietly for Lilac's return, hoping no cat would enter. Especially Egret.

A few minutes passed and Rosepaw's stomach was churning with dread. Where was Lilac? Would Egret enter soon and torment Rosepaw?

She heard pawsteps, but she couldn't tell if it was Lilac's or Egret's. She pretended to be asleep, but two - wait, no, four paws pressed into her. Four tiny paws.

"Hello? Are you awake?" A quiet voice asked.

Rosepaw's eyes opened. It was a kit.

"I am." Rosepaw rasped, craning her head to get a look. Three kits stood by her flank, one of them holding dripping moss.

"Lilac told is to deliver this to you!" The only she-kit, a calico, nudged the kit wielding the dripping moss to Rosepaw.

The first of the two tom-kits was a gray tabby tom-kit, timidly dropping the moss by Rosepaw's maw. He scrambled back to his littermates.

"You don't have to be scared of me," whispered Rosepaw softly, licking water droplets off of the moss. *This could've been good nest material.* Rosepaw's heart ached as she thought about how much Lilac sacrificed for her. Surely the she-cat could find more moss for her own nest?

"D-Don't tell Egret that I'm scared." The tom-kit who gave her the moss whimpered.

The other tom-kit, a solid gray tom-kit, nodded his head, bending his head over his brother.

"I'd never dream of it." Rosepaw flicked her ear, noticing the calico's fiery gaze as she shot a glare at her brother.

"You're scared of *her*?" The she-kit scoffed. "She can barely stand, let alone talk." Rosepaw winced at her words.

"S-Sorry Wasp." The tabby tom-kit lowered his gaze.

"Kittens!" Lilac's singsong meow came from the entrance of the den. "I hope you introduced yourselves to her because it's time to go back to your mother."

The kits hurriedly introduced themselves before darting away. The calico was Wasp like the tabby had said. The tabby tom-kit was Mud and the other tom-kit was Soot.

"I hope they weren't annoying. I had to check up on Melody." Lilac padded to Rosepaw. Rosepaw took note of the sound of her paws pressing into the ground. Hers was gentle and Rosepaw would imagine Egret's was louder. Probably a lot more menacing, too.

"They weren't." Rosepaw reassured. "They're quite adorable actually."

"They are." Lilac agreed softly. Was that melancholy in her voice?

*She misses her kits. They were probably adorable too.* Rosepaw thought sadly.

Lilac cleared her throat, sitting on her nest - if you even called it a nest.

"Do you want some of my moss?" Rosepaw asked suddenly.

Lilac glanced at her, confused. "Huh?"

"For your nest." Rosepaw indicated to Lilac's nest.

Lilac smiled and shook her head. "I'm okay, thank you. I'm used to this anyway."

"What do you mean?" Rosepaw asked, intrigued. What cat would be *okay* with sleeping on the hard ground?

Lilac sucked a breath in. "I'd rather not say. Let's keep it at this though: Egret."

"Oh." Rosepaw fell silent. This place was becoming stranger and scarier.

"Practice standing. I hope you've regained some strength. You certainly look better." Lilac mewed.

"Don't you have herbs for strength?" Rosepaw inquired while practicing, getting into a crouch position. With some struggle, she was on her paws. Her very shaky paws that yearned for rest, not yet ready to use her energy.

Lilac nodded at her stance, then replied. "Herbs for strength? No, I don't believe so. What are they called?"

"Um, I think chamomile is one. It's typically used to walk far distances, but I'm sure it'll help me regain my strength." Rosepaw's heart felt pricked by thorns when she said that. She wouldn't have known that if it weren't for Rowanmask...

*I miss him more than I imagined.* Rosepaw turned to Lilac as the she-cat scoured through what limited herbs she had. *I wonder if he*

*misses me?*

"I don't think I have chamomile." Lilac gently meowed. "What does it look like?"

Rosepaw's eyes lazily drifted over her pile, not spotting it either. "It's a small white flower."

"How do you know so much about herbs?" Lilac's eyes widened with wonder.

Rosepaw purred, liking the feeling of knowing more than a cat older than her. "I'm a medicine cat apprentice in my Clan, so I learn all about this stuff." She sat down.

"I see." Lilac was about to walk out, but halted. "Can you teach me about herbs later? I'm not as skilled as I seem."

Rosepaw nodded, flicking her tail. Satisfaction rippled under her pelt as Lilac left, only for the satisfaction to turn into sheer fear. Egret replaced Lilac, eyes trained on Rosepaw.

"If you're going to stay here for a while, you need a name that isn't Clan-like." Egret meowed roughly, stopping in front of her. Rosepaw stopped herself from flinching.

"R-Rose. I want my name to be Rose." Rosepaw answered, this time flinching when Egret snorted.

"That's what *you* want. *I* choose the names here." Egret's ears twitched, then she looked away, puffing. "Rose is fine, I suppose. Don't do that again, though. You've been warned."

Rose stiffened as Egret left, tail lashing. Her mind trailed back to her first conversation with Lilac.

*'Egret used to be an amazing ruler - but after she talked to a Clan cat, she started killing the weak cats'...* What kind of talk with a Clan cat would influence Egret to do such horrifying things?

*Sootripple or... or the one who attempted to murder me.* Rosepaw couldn't remember the face who tried to end her life short.

*Why can't I remember?* Albeit panicked, Rose took deep breaths, soothing herself. The cat had been a tom - no, she-cat - and had murdered Rainpaw. Rose winced, feeling awful. She had sent Rainpaw out for something. Sticks? *It hurts too much to think about this...*

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# Chapter Four

***!TW! CHAPTER FOUR !TW!***

***SHELLPAW | SHADOWCLAN CAMP***

***Please note this chapter will be gorier than other chapters. If you aren't comfortable with that, scroll down to the bottom to see a summary of what happened.***

*Shellpaw arched his back, yawning.* His paranoia about Hollymoon around every corner had died down the past few days, but he was still certain Hollymoon was murderous. He watched Coaltooth slip out of camp. Suspicion stirred in his stomach, but he forced himself to look away when Coaltooth looked in his direction.

On a brighter note, however, he was going to be made a warrior quite soon.

"Are you excited?" Littlewish padded up to him, eyes shining. "Your assessment is tomorrow! What would you like to practice today?"

Shellpaw stared at the ground. What did he need to work on?

"Battling. I'm not too good at it." Shellpaw meowed modestly.

Littlewish nodded. "I hope you're comfortable fighting Poolfoot since she was made a warrior only three moons ago. The other apprentices are too young and inexperienced."

Shellpaw tipped his head in agreement.

"Would you like to spar or run over hard moves?" Littlewish asked as she led the way out of camp, tail beckoning him to follow.

"Definitely have to practice hard moves." Shellpaw meowed gravely, thinking about his past failures.

Littlewish purred in amusement.

The latter began to venture out after asking Poolfoot if she'd meet them at ShadowClan's training area. She had agreed, saying she'd catch up after finishing her meal.

After some time, Littlewish paused, tasting the air. Her ears angled back at a worried angle and she turned to Shellpaw.

"Do you smell that?" Littlewish murmured, dropping her voice.

Shellpaw opened his jaws, startled by the strong scent of blood. Curiously, he stepped ahead of Littlewish, eyes scanning the wilting undergrowth. Just a couple days ago, these plants had a brilliant green hue. Now, they had an ugly yellow-brown color, dying away to the biting cold that had yet to come.

Littlewish gasped and brushed past him, parting the ferns.

Shellpaw looked away, swearing he was going to vomit. Blood coated a large rock that was beside a cat's head.

"Coaltooth." Littlewish mumbled, darting forward. It was indeed Coaltooth. His black-and-white pelt was still running with blood and his head had definitely been bashed with a rock since his head was split open.

Shellpaw groaned. Hollymoon definitely stepped it up this time. It had to be her. There was no other choice.

Why, though? Why'd she kill him? Shellpaw stared with round, disbelieving eyes at the bloody scene. The blood would stay there for ages, reminding the ShadowClan cats of this sudden tragedy.

"Sootripple did this," muttered Littlewish, eyes dark with sadness, "and hated him for a very strong reason."

*And whoever did this left the scene a few seconds before we came.* Shellpaw noticed trampled grass that was specked with blood leading away from the bloody clearing.

"Look, Littlewish." He gestured to the grass. "They're near here,

heading back to their Clan."

"...their Clan?" Littlewish's eyes clouded with confusion. "Sootripple doesn't have a Clan. He was exiled."

"Exactly. It wasn't him." Shellpaw meowed, following the trampled grass. "I suspect Hollymoon did this."

"Hollymoon?" Littlewish repeated, skeptical. "How so?"

"Remember Maplefern's murderer? It wasn't Sootripple. That was Hollymoon's bidding, and this was surely hers too." Shellpaw explained a little more in-depth while keeping his eyes on the grass. Hollymoon didn't cover her track that well.

*If Littlewish and I both see Hollymoon, we can tell Snakestar and the cat who haunts my dreams will finally be gone.* Shellpaw's heart pounded in his ears. *Hollymoon had taken a turn here... heading toward the lake...*

*To wash off any blood.* Shellpaw guessed, narrowing his eyes.

Littlewish walked quietly behind him, ears pricked for any sound and eyes flitting around everywhere.

Shellpaw ducked under a low-hanging branch, gasping out loud when he saw Hollymoon - wait no - it wasn't Hollymoon. This was a cat he would've never even guessed who'd commit such... a gruesome murder. The lake water by their paws was colored red, confirming this was the cat who killed Coaltooth.

Littlewish yowled the cat's name, but Shellpaw was stunned, standing still as his mentor rushed past him.

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***SUMMARY:***

Shellpaw's warrior assessment is coming up. Littlewish takes him out to practice some battle moves, but a murder was committed ahead of them. They discover the body, identifying it as Coaltooth. They find a track of trampled, bloody grass and follow it to the

murderer, who, up to that moment, Shellpaw believed had to be Hollymoon. Shockingly, it isn't...

***END OF SUMMARY***

*imagine if i wrote chapters like the summary. i'd surely have no reads :p anyway, i'm going to be a jerk and leave it on a cliffhanger and make you guys read to find out who did it.*

*any ideas on who it is?*

*-artemis*

# Chapter Five

***CHAPTER FIVE***

***HAZELPAW | THUNDERCLAN CAMP***

*When Hazelpaw walked out of the* apprentices den very early that morning, she was startled by the sudden cold. The sky was completely white with fluffy clouds. Puffing out her tortoiseshell fur, she walked over to Turtlecreek, who was studying the sky.

"T-Turtlecreek?" Hazelpaw asked, voice chattering from the cold.

"Yes, Hazelpaw?" Turtlecreek turned to her daughter.

"Why is it freezing?"

Turtlecreek hummed in response. "It's going to snow today."

*That doesn't answer my question!* Hazelpaw thought, mildly annoyed.

But Turtlecreek wasn't done. "It's always cold when snow is on the way. The snow is even colder to touch."

"Oh." Hazelpaw shook her pelt. "I hope it's not too bad."

Turtlecreek purred, running her tail over Hazelpaw's spine. "Once you're out and about, you'll be fine. You'll be warm and energetic."

"Whatever you say," murmured Hazelpaw, doubtful.

"There's Dewpaw." Turtlecreek perked up, watching her other daughter come out and jump back when a gust of icy wind blew in her face.

Dewpaw stalked over, her fur blown the wrong way. "Today is already a bad day and it's not even dawn yet." She huffed irritably, licking tufts of fur blown the wrong way by the wind.

Hazelpaw let out a snort of amusement at her sister's ill-tempered words. Dewpaw was just grumpy by how early it was.

"And what's worse is I have to go on the dawn patrol. Why today of all days?" Dewpaw whined.

Hazelpaw nodded in agreement. The two littermates were both going on the dawn patrol, explaining why they were awake. Why Turtlecreek was up was a mystery to the two sisters; their mother was always a early bird, but for what reason?

"It won't be bad." Turtlecreek chuckled.

Hazelpaw and Dewpaw shared a skeptical look, but didn't voice their doubts. Instead, they waited in silence, watching every warrior that came out of the warriors den.

While watching, Dewpaw murmured to Hazelpaw. "It'll feel amazing once we're warriors."

"And I'll be so proud of you both." Turtlecreek chimed in before Hazelpaw responded.

"Are you proud of us right now?" Hazelpaw asked.

Turtlecreek gazed at Hazelpaw and Dewpaw fondly. "I'm super proud of you - and Lynxpaw - right now."

"Do you promise you'll see our ceremony?" Dewpaw crossed in front of Hazelpaw.

"I'd skip any patrol thrown at me on the day of it," mewed Turtlecreek earnestly.

"Hazelpaw! Dewpaw!" Palefang's scratchy voice caught their attention. "Come on."

"Bye, Turtlecreek!" Hazelpaw and Dewpaw chorused in sync before scrambling away. On the dawn patrol consisted of Honeypool, Ivypelt, Larchtail, Palefang, Hazelpaw, and Dewpaw.

*An awfully large patrol.* Hazelpaw thought. *But it makes sense.*

*Sootripple is still a threat.*

Honeypool dipped his head in a friendly gesture to the apprentices, then arched his feathery tail over his head, gesturing for the rest of the patrol to follow. Hazelpaw and Dewpaw had to lope to keep up with the older cats longer strides.

Thankfully, the warriors pace slowed down, allowing the two apprentices to regain their energy. Hazelpaw dropped her head, catching her breath. When she looked back up, scattered white flecks were dropping from the sky, dancing around in the air before landing on the ground, vanishing. Soon, the white flecks came down harder and faster, getting caught on Hazelpaw's fur. Flicking her ear, Hazelpaw huffed and tried to stay under the trees.

"Is this snow?" Dewpaw wondered aloud.

Honeypool looked over his shoulder, whiskers twitching. "It is."

"It's not what I imagined." Dewpaw licked a spot in her fur where a snowflake rested. "I don't taste it!"

The patrol chuckled at her comment. Hazelpaw opened her mouth to ask Palefang something, but the faint scent of blood and WindClan flooded her mouth. No, it wasn't *prey* blood. It smelled like a cat.

Honeypool also smelled it, ears pricked. He stared across the WindClan border, seemingly trying to search for something.

Dewpaw gasped loudly. "Look! Why's the ground stained red?" She pointed with her paw at a hill. If Hazelpaw squinted, she could see it.

"Blood." Palefang dully replied. "Faint, but definitely after the emergency Gathering."

"Sootripple had to do this." Ivypelt bared her teeth. Something in her voice made Hazelpaw frown. Why'd she say it... like... she was supposed to?

Hazelpaw shook her head, clenching her teeth. *You're cold,*

*Hazelpaw. The temperature is just messing with your head,* she scolded herself.

"Should we go check on WindClan?" Dewpaw chirped to Honeypool.

Honeypool didn't turn around, eyes flashing. Finally, after several heartbeats, he twisted around. "No. It's none of our business, Dewpaw." He shook his fur out. "Let's head back to camp, shall we? It's getting colder by the second." His last few words were swept away by the blowing wind.

The rest of the patrol agreed, with Palefang remarking her whiskers would fall off soon. They hurried back to camp, bursting through the camp entrance.

The atmosphere was tense when Hazelpaw stepped into camp. The fur on her spine rose uneasily as ShadowClan's smell lingered on her tongue.

She locked gazes with Dewpaw, shrugging. In the center of camp stood a blue-gray she-cat and an apprentice she recognized as Shellpaw.

*Why are they here? And what did they do to - oh StarClan!* Horror engulfed Hazelpaw and terror clouded her thoughts.

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# Chapter Six

***CHAPTER SIX***

***ROSE | UNKNOWN LOCATION***

*"Come on Rose, you know today's* the deadline." Lilac's worried and frustrated voice broke Rose's focus. "Walk to me."

*'Walk to me'... that sounds so familiar.* Rose winced, realizing that's what Kestrelheart prompted her to do when she was learning to walk. That was one of the things she remembered her mother saying to her as a kit. It meant a lot to Rose since Kestrelheart had been encouraging her to try.

"I'm trying." It was already a lot of effort to stand for a long period of time. With shaky, flimsy legs, she stumbled toward Lilac, catching herself before she fell.

"That's good." It didn't sound like a praise. Lilac was pressing her on, eyes shining with concern. "You only need to show Egret you can walk from here to the prey heap. If you can walk to me, back to your nest, then back to me without stopping once, you're set."

Rose bit her lip. It was so hard to not stop and drop into a crouch. With a strained grunt, Rose made the last couple of steps to Lilac, panting.

"Good." Lilac ushered her to turn around before Rose could get the chance to sit down. "Again."

"My legs..." groaned Rose, walking back. Surprisingly, her legs felt better now, more blood circulating through them.

"It'll be over soon and you can rest after Egret evaluates you."

"What happens if I fail?" Rose asked timidly.

Lilac's eyes darkened. "Rose, Rose..." her voice trembled. "I know

you're technically not apart of our group, but Egret will-" Lilac tore her gaze away, voice cracking. "Egret will-" she let out a sob.

"I understand." Rose whispered, looking outside of the den.

*If I fail, I'll never get to say a proper goodbye to Kestrelheart, or Dawnstream, or... Rowanmask.* Guilt swamped her. They all probably believed she was dead. She was soon to be dead, though.

"Hurry, Rose. She'll be here soon." Lilac begged, blue eyes pleading.

Rose forced herself to walk all the way to Lilac without stopping once or letting a whimper escape her jaws. It was hard, but she did it. And honestly, she felt like she accomplished something huge.

Lilac's expression was warm and bright with joy, but her eyes breezed past Rose. The light faded, and she wished Rose good luck.

Rose turned around. Egret stood there, eyes narrowed at Rose.

"Come on." Egret meowed gruffly. Rose took a deep breath and walked as steadily as she could to Egret.

Lilac followed Rose, stopping by Egret.

"I want you to walk all the way to the prey heap," instructed Egret emotionlessly, indicating to the pitiful fresh-kill pile.

Rose made no acknowledging sound and began, forcing herself not to think about what would happen if she failed. The blowing wind certainly wasn't helping. A very light coat of frost glittered under paw, helping Rose take her mind off of this.

Off to the side of the camp, or in the rogue's case, base, sat a calico she-cat watching her fervently. The three kits, Wasp, Mud, and Soot, were busy playing with a pinecone.

Everything was going smoothly until Rose's forepaw stepped on her other forepaw. She crashed onto the cold ground, shock racing through her veins. No way did StarClan just let that happen.

She threw a desperate, frightened glance over her shoulder. Egret simply stared at her, eyes calculating and cold. Lilac looked ready to jump out of her pelt. Egret rose, padding over to Rose.

"Lilac, it seems you were wrong." Egret's smooth voice seemed colder than the freezing air. "She wasn't ready."

Lilac flinched, shuffling to her den slowly. "I-I thought-"

"You thought?" Egret mocked. "Thought what?" She glowered at Lilac scornfully.

Rose was waiting for the killing blow, but to her surprise, Egret padded to Lilac. As fast as a hawk, she pinned the healer.

Rose's eyes widened, scrambling to her paws. Crouching, she fearfully watched Lilac writhe and thrash.

Egret met her fearful gaze, face twisting into a sick smile, as though she enjoyed the torment she caused. "Lilac told me you have more herb knowledge than her yesterday." Egret dug her claws in Lilac's shoulder. "So, I thought 'hey, why not kill Lilac either way?' She's worthless if you're here."

Lilac whimpered, her blue eyes imploring Rose to help. But Rose couldn't. She clearly couldn't walk, so what made Lilac think she was ready to fight?

*She would've killed Lilac either way... this was a worthless trial.* Rose unsheathed her claws and stood up, trying to not lose balance as everything shifted in her mind. *Egret's going to keep me here, against my will.*

Lilac's wails of agony sent shudders through Rose. Rose deliberately made sure she looked away, screwing her eyes shut. Lilac suddenly fell silent. Deathly silent.

The she-cat with the kits let out a quiet whimper only loud enough for Rose to hear. Rose felt the same way.

Utterly horrified.

"Rose, I hope you are okay with being our group's new healer." Egret's tone left no room for argument. "Get comfy with your new den."

Rose made sure she looked at the ground as she stumbled back to the healer's den. All she saw of Lilac was her limp tail, blowing in the wind gently.

With a lump in her throat, she entered the healer's den and sat down in her nest.

Lilac had been like a mother figure to her, and now she had caused the death of her. That was what made Rose feel awful; she was the reason why Lilac was dead. If she was never here, Lilac would be alive.

*On the bright side, she's with her family.* Why didn't it feel so bright, then?

Rose curled up tighter as snow swirled through the skylight, dappling the den in white flecks.

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# Chapter Seven

***CHAPTER SEVEN***

***SHELLPAW | THUNDERCLAN TERRITORY***

*"Mistysong!" Littlewish's accusation didn't* seem real to Shellpaw as he stood there, dazed.

*Mistysong?* He blinked rapidly. ThunderClan's medicine cat had killed Coaltooth? *But she's a medicine cat... perhaps that's berry juice on her paws?*

It wasn't, though. It was blood tainting the water.

Mistysong jumped back from the water, startled to see them. Smoothing her spiked fur, she blinked as though she were an innocent cat. "Oh, it's great to see you, Littlewish!"

Littlewish growled, baring her teeth. "Don't act so innocent, Mistysong. You killed Coaltooth."

Mistysong's facade died away immediately. She curled her lip. "So I did. What's the big deal?"

Shellpaw didn't expect her to brush it off so casually.

Littlewish spluttered, also not expecting that. "You-you killed a cat! That's the big deal!"

"I have my reasons." Mistysong shrugged nonchalantly.

Littlewish, aggravated, lowered herself to the ground. Mistysong tensed, noticing Littlewish's intentions. Shellpaw watched her claws slide out, then she bolted into the forest.

"Go!" Littlewish yowled at him. Still numb with shock, Shellpaw raced after Mistysong, Littlewish on his paws. She eventually dashed past him, gaining onto Mistysong.

Mistysong was taking an interesting route. She kept scraping herself against trees or diving into bramble thickets.

*Trying to throw us off.* Shellpaw narrowed his eyes, gaining a burst of speed.

Mistysong dived into a hole. Littlewish leapt in after her, snarling. Shellpaw slowed down, going down the hole as fast as he could without slipping.

When he skidded to a stop next to Littlewish, his fur stood straight up. He was in the heart of ThunderClan. ThunderClan cats were spitting and hissing at them, bewildered by their sudden presence.

"ThunderClan!" Mistysong's yowl was loud, catching everyone's attention. "These fox-hearted ShadowClan cats have harmed me!"

"What? No!" Littlewish spat.

Mistysong narrowed her eyes. "How do you explain all of this, then, Littlewish?" Her pelt was streaked with blood. Shellpaw frowned: how'd she get scratches?

*She ran through those thickets and slammed herself against trees so she'd bleed!* Shellpaw flattened his ears, enraged. *Such a sly medicine cat!*

Littlewish seemed to be at a loss for words, fumbling. "But - what - how?"

"These two tried to kill me!" Mistysong growled.

Rustling behind them made Shellpaw glance over his shoulder. Honeypool padded through, thoroughly stunned to see him and Littlewish standing there. A few more cats walked out from behind of him, frowning.

Nectarstar exited his den, loping down the rocks. Honeypool padded over to him, sitting down.

"Why are you two here?" Nectarstar asked, venom clear in his

unfriendly tone.

"They tried to kill me!" Mistysong screeched before Littlewish could explain. "They were so dedicated that they chased me here."

Nectarstar seemed mildly confused, jaw moving but no words coming out. Honeypool whispered something in his ear, eyes flashing. With a renewed understanding in his posture, Nectarstar analyzed the situation.

"I see." Nectarstar cleared his throat, then growled spitefully in Shellpaw's direction. "They're murderers!"

"So it'd seem." Mistysong mewed dryly, looking at Nectarstar intensely, looking as though she was trying to convey a message. She tended to her wounds while shooting Nectarstar those intense glares, trying so hard to get his attention.

*Do they believe Mistysong?* Shellpaw twirled around, paws flexing anxiously. He studied Honeypool, who kept a straight face, revealing nothing. *He's the most reasonable cat here, surely...?*

"Nectarstar, with all due respect, may we explain our side of the story?" Littlewish asked, voice strained, holding back apparent rage.

Nectarstar flicked his tail lazily, allowing Shellpaw's mentor to speak. Littlewish relayed what happened to them. When she finished, the camp was silent, processing both stories. Mistysong looked particularly tense, eyes narrowed and muscles taut.

Suddenly, a warrior burst out laughing. "A medicine cat, killing cats? What's even more shocking is Mistysong killing a cat? Sure, she has a temper, but she wouldn't harm any cat."

Shellpaw searched for the cat who had spoken. The cat was a fluffy gray tabby she-cat, amber eyes shining with amusement.

Mistysong relaxed, sitting down. "Exactly."

Shellpaw didn't want to be in this situation. This was a dream. It had to be.

"Well," Honeypool spoke up, "I believe Mistysong's story."

"B-But Coaltooth is actually dead! We have proof."

"You could've killed him." Honeypool challenged. Shellpaw shrunk away from the ThunderClan deputy; his typical warm eyes had a fire in them that frightened him. Honeypool wasn't one to mess with when tipped over the edge. "Stop trying to frame my sister." He got up and padded to Mistysong. He faced away from the crowd and whispered something in her ear. Mistysong looked away, conversing quietly and quickly with him.

"Shellpaw," Littlewish turned to him, lowering her head so she was eye level with him, "if we are accused for murder, run. Run back to ShadowClan and warn them."

"What about you?" Shellpaw whispered fearfully, fearing for Littlewish.

"Don't worry about me." Littlewish gave him a smile. "I'll return."

His spirit lifted hopefully.

"But only if you make it back." Littlewish's sentence made his hopeful spirits plummet. If he made it.

*They'll send warriors after me who know this forest better and are faster.* Shellpaw swallowed his anxiety.

Littlewish looked past him, hissing a curse underneath her breath. "They blocked the entrance. Shellpaw, we're going to have to face this together now. I wish things didn't turn out like this."

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# Chapter Eight

***CHAPTER EIGHT***

***ROSE | ROGUE BASE***

*Rose woke up in the middle* of the night to find a thin layer of snow under the skylight. Groaning, Rose turned away, fluffing her fur. Everything was awful. Lilac was gone and now there was snow next to Rose, threatening to spill and cover her.

*Should I attempt escape?* Rose stared at the entrance, then thought about the snow. *My pawprints will be left, and I can't walk too far yet. Egret will track me down when I'm resting my legs.*

Sighing, Rose set her head on the paws and fell back asleep, fur twitching uncomfortably.

***

Rose yawned, surprised to be awake so soon. It was dawn outside - or it felt like it. It was still cloudy and snowing, so she couldn't tell. A fine inch of snow coated the ground when Rose got to her paws and walked outside, her legs feeling great.

"Good morning," purred a gray she-cat with black splotches, looking directly as Rose, "hope you slept well?"

"Uh, I did." Rose was glad Egret was the only one insane here. This she-cat seemed nice like everyone else in the group, minus Egret.

"My name's Rosemary." Rosemary got to her paws. "I find it a coincidence our names are so close."

*She knows my name?* Rose was shocked at first, then suppressed the urge to roll her eyes at her own stupidity. Egret would've announced that she was the new healer and gave the group her name.

"I hope we'll become good friends." Rosemary purred softly before stalking away.

Rose stared at her paws, not sure how to feel. She went back to the healer's den to check out what herbs Lilac had.

Her heart felt pierced when she thought of Lilac. She didn't bother looking at Lilac's nest anymore. It was forever empty and pained Rose anyway if she did look at it.

After checking out what herbs she had, she made a mental note to grab lots more of everything. How did Lilac heal any cat? She got to her paws and headed outside of the healer's den.

When she was out of the healer's den, her heart stopped. Across from her stood a painfully familiar tom. Wait, why was... *Lilac* next to him?! Lilac was dead! She searched her eyes, but hers were locked on *his* face. Rose then glared at him. His eyes locked with hers, surprise flaring inside of them. He got up and took a step towards her.

Rose jumped back, fur bristling. She hadn't seen this coming when she was coming out of the healer's den.

"W-Why are you here?" She spat, distancing herself away from him.

"Rose, what's wrong?" Lilac asked, soothingly wrapping her tail around Rose's shoulders. "Do you know Ripple?"

Rose bared her teeth, unwilling to tell her anything. Sootripple - no, Ripple - stared back at her, eyes wide with surprise.

"I haven't seen her before in my life," meowed Ripple, ear flicking, "but perhaps I look like a cat she knows."

Rose's heart hammered against her ribcage like a bird trapped in a cage. Why was he here?

Why was Lilac alive? Rose knew that sounded harsh, but she - she was dead for StarClan's sake! Rose shrugged off Lilac's tail, claws unsheathed.

*This isn't right!* Rose jumped away from Lilac, surveying both of them. Then, slowly, she drew up one of her paws and pricked herself. No pain.

*I'm dreaming. That explains everything. My legs, Lilac, but is Sootripple really here?* Rose stared into his yellow eyes, pelt rippling.

*Wake up! Wake up, Rose!* Rose willed herself to get out of it.

When she opened her eyes, everything was quiet. It was still snowing and there was a fine inch of snow coating the ground. Her legs ached when she rose to her paws, but she could walk without as many problems. Bracing herself, she walked outside of camp.

"Hey!" a friendly mew rang in her ears. "You're our new healer, right?"

It was Rosemary. Her green eyes glittered invitingly, waving her tail.

"Oh, hello." Rose meowed wearily. It was starting out like her dream. What was happening?

"I'm Rosem-"

"I know." Rose rudely interrupted. She had to change something from her dream!

Rosemary's eyes narrowed slightly, upset she was cut off.

"Er, sorry, Rosemary." Rose padded back to her den to check her herbs. *No, wait! Don't go back!*

But it was like there was a force, forcing her paws to take this route. She had to check the herb store. She nosed through the herbs, making a mental note to gather every herb when she was collecting herbs. Wait, would Egret let her?

Rose backed out of the den, whirling around. Nothing. All of that building suspense for what?

*I was just having a nightmare.* Rose sighed, sitting back on her

haunches.

Her ear flicked when she heard commotion outside of the base. Warily, she glanced in that direction, jumping back when three cats entered camp, two wrestling the one in the middle.

"Egret!" one of the suppressors yowled. "We found an intruder."

Egret came out of nowhere, literally, and came over. She didn't spare Rose a glance.

"Release him." Egret ordered.

Rose hung her head. It was Sootripple.

The two cats shared a glance and got off. One of them that she recognized, the calico, hurried away to a den.

"What's your name?" Egret asked roughly.

Sootripple's gaze slid past Egret, meeting Rose's. "Sootripple." Did he recognize her? He didn't give anything away and looked back to Egret.

Egret sniffed. "Considering our sizes due to... complications," Rose narrowed her eyes, "would you like to join us?"

"It would be my honor." Sootripple murmured, gaze meeting Rose's again. It made her fur rise in discomfort. Why'd he keep looking at her? Gah, of course he recognized her and was wondering why she was here.

"Since I don't approve of Clan names, you'll go by Ripple."

*That was his name in my dream! Was my dream trying to warn me of something?* Rose's mind was clouded with confusion as she melted back into her den. *If so, what?*

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# Chapter Nine

***CHAPTER NINE***

***HAZELPAW | THUNDERCLAN CAMP***

*Hazelpaw wasn't any expert in scratches,* but the scratches on Mistysong's pelt didn't look like they were done by a cat. But Mistysong was a medicine cat, and she told the truth, at least that's what she was told. Medicine cats were chosen by StarClan, cats pure at heart. But her story was so out there... her eyes trailed over to Shellpaw, a cat she knew very little about. They didn't chat much at Gatherings, but Dewpaw may have chatted with him before. Or Lynxpaw for that matter.

"Do you know Shellpaw?" Hazelpaw turned to Dewpaw, keeping her voice low.

Dewpaw shrugged. "Not that much. Whenever I tried to catch his gaze, he always seemed to be searching for someone else. Especially last Gathering. His fur kept bristling and stuff."

"Huh." Hazelpaw hummed, facing the ShadowClan cats again.

"Well, Nectarstar, what are we going to do?" Honeypool asked, devoid of any emotion.

Nectarstar shied away from the attention directed at him. "Um..."

*It'd just be best if Honeypool was leader now.* Hazelpaw thought. Nectarstar wasn't as smart as he pretended to be.

"They're murderers," Mistysong's lethal hiss directed the attention to her, "keep them captive until ShadowClan decides to retrieve them. That's when we'll tell them they're pathetic excuses for cats and deserve to be exiled."

Hazelpaw winced even though the words weren't meant for her. That stung, and she imagined how much worse it felt for the

ShadowClan cats.

"If you're going to keep us captive, let Shellpaw go." Littlewish meowed, voice firm. "He's not a killer. I take the blame. I-I killed Coaltooth."

Something in Mistysong's eyes flashed. Surprise? "Finally confessing, hm?" Mistysong spat.

Littlewish shrank away. "Let my apprentice go."

Honeypool flicked his tail. "Palefang, Hazelpaw, escort Shellpaw back to ShadowClan's border."

Hazelpaw perked. She was chosen?

Palefang padded past her, heading for Shellpaw. Hazelpaw followed in tow, taking the very back when Palefang warned Shellpaw to not act up. The splotched tom nodded fearfully.

Palefang led the way out of camp slowly, grunting with effort.

"Are you okay, Palefang?" Hazelpaw asked, ignoring Shellpaw's presence. If Palefang was struggling, then she should go back.

"I am. Don't worry about me, Hazelpaw." Palefang grunted.

Shellpaw's ear flicked every time they spoke, tense. "May I say something?" He asked timidly.

Hazelpaw expected Palefang to snap at him, but the old she-cat twisted around, voice soft. "Yes, you may."

"Mistysong killed Coaltooth. Littlewish lied - Littlewish didn't kill Coaltooth. She just wanted to protect me..." his voice trailed off.

Palefang kept going, not saying anything. Hazelpaw sympathized for Shellpaw, shocked to find herself believing him. Mistysong can't be evil. But Shellpaw's round, genuinely innocent eyes made her start to rethink everything.

"Why would Mistysong kill Coaltooth, though?" Hazelpaw softly

asked.

"I don't know." Shellpaw replied quietly, frustrating Hazelpaw. She sort of wanted an answer.

"What do you think, Palefang?" Hazelpaw stared at her mentor's cream fur.

"I don't know." Palefang bluntly answered, picking up the pace. Hazelpaw knew she touched on a sensitive topic.

"Make sure they don't hurt Littlewish." Shellpaw pleaded them as they neared the border. Once they were at the ShadowClan border, Shellpaw crossed the border, turning to them. "Please."

Palefang eyed him warily, lowering her head. "There's not much we can do."

Shellpaw reluctantly turned away, swallowed up by the looming shadows.

Hazelpaw turned to Palefang, tilting her head. "We have to help Littlewish."

"What do you mean, *help*?" Palefang asked, scowling.

"Help her escape?" Hazelpaw knew Palefang didn't think Littlewish was evil.

Palefang snorted, failing to hide her surprise. "We can't help a killer-"

"You don't think she's a murderer, though." Hazelpaw cut her off, not wanting to stay on this discussion forever.

"What makes you think we can pull it off? I'm old, Hazelpaw. Besides, we'd be punished if caught in the act."

"What would the punishment be?" Hazelpaw frowned at her paws.

Palefang's eyes darkened considerably. She lifted her muzzle up

to the sky, shaking her head. "Just trust me, Hazelpaw." What punishment would make Palefang so frightened? "Especially don't try it. Just trust StarClan to guide Littlewish's paws to safety."

Hazelpaw headbutted her mentor's shoulder comfortingly. "I won't try."

***

Hazelpaw sighed, staring at Dewpaw's miserable look as her sister gazed at Lynxpaw and Stormpaw who were getting closer every day.

"They'll be mates the second they're both warriors. Then they'll have kits." Hazelpaw halfheartedly attempted to cheer her sister up.

"Lucky." Dewpaw muttered, clearly not in the mood to tease Lynxpaw's clear affection for Stormpaw. "Could've been Sootripple and me."

Hazelpaw grumbled, mildly irritated by Dewpaw's sadness. She prodded her sister's ribs, making Dewpaw jerk in surprise.

"*What*?" Dewpaw flattened her ears.

"Can you stop moping around?"

Offended, Dewpaw turned away. "No."

"You're acting like Turtlecreek died."

Dewpaw looked back to Hazelpaw, eyes wide with horror. "That'd be much worse."

"Well, then, I don't want to see..." she gestured with her paws to Dewpaw's sad posture, "this anymore."

"Hmph." Dewpaw glared at her paws.

"Besides, do you even know if Sootripple liked you?"

"...I imagined he did. Probably not, though. Sootripple had his

eye on Seedfall."

Hazelpaw drew a paw over her face. "Oh, I thought Seedfall was with Doeblaze?"

"Yeah, now." Dewpaw mumbled. "Seedfall and Doeblaze announced that she was expecting last night - when you were asleep." Dewpaw's typical sly tone slipped into her mournful voice. She glanced sideways at Hazelpaw.

Hazelpaw growled playfully. "I was tired! Why were you still up?"

"I can't go to sleep at, what, dusk unlike some cat?" Dewpaw straightened her posture, baring her teeth playfully.

"You'll pay for that!" Hazelpaw dove on her sister, laughing. Dewpaw rolled onto her back and pummeled Hazelpaw's belly softly, eyes glittering with joy. As they rolled on the ground, a paw stopped them. Hazelpaw looked up into fiery yellow eyes. Startled, she got off of Dewpaw, facing her father, Smokelight.

"Don't get too close to the prisoner." Smokelight sneered, the current guard guarding Littlewish.

"She's not dangerous." Dewpaw breezed. Hazelpaw froze, avoiding eye contact with Smokelight. Why'd Dewpaw have to say that?

Smokelight glanced at Dewpaw, rolling his eyes. "How do you know that? She confessed that she killed her own Clanmate."

Dewpaw glanced at Hazelpaw, realizing she was in a situation she'd have to explain. "Um, no reason. Actually, she is dangerous. I'm, uh, tired. Yeah."

Smokelight was obviously unconvinced, but he didn't press anymore. He muttered something under his breath, and Hazelpaw swore he said something about how Turtlecreek raised mouse-brains as his kits.

"Come on, Dewpaw." Hazelpaw murmured, running her tail over

Dewpaw's spine. "Let's go collect moss for the elders!"

"What? I don't want to do that." Dewpaw complained loudly as Hazelpaw led her away.

"We're not doing that, feather-brain." Hazelpaw teased. "It was just to get away."

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# Chapter Ten

***CHAPTER TEN***

***ROSE | UNKNOWN TERRITORY***

*She was out of the base* and in uncharted territory. A tom who went by the name of Ashen accompanied her, presumably making sure she didn't try to escape.

"Do you know where I could find marigold?" Rose turned to the gray tabby questioningly.

The tom perked, head tilted. "Marigold?"

"Oh, never mind." Rose flicked her ear, forgetting he wasn't an expert at herbs. "Do you know any berry bushes or flower patches around here?"

Ashen nodded dutifully, leading her through a meadow with grass that was as high as her, perhaps higher. An idea began forming in her head.

"Are there snakes in here?" Rose asked, senses alert.

Ashen looked over his shoulder, shaking his head. "None, unless they've just never showed themselves."

"Ah." Rosepaw murmured distantly. She could escape with this grass! She stopped walking, moving her paws in place to make the sound of snow crunching under her paws. Ashen didn't glance back to see if she was truly following; he just plowed through, swallowed up by the long grass.

*This is my chance!* Anticipation raced through Rose. She dashed to the right, exhilaration and freedom racing through her veins.

Her legs were definitely being tipped over the edge at this point, but all the hurting would be worth. Suddenly, a large object bowled

into her.

"Rose, you can't do that." Ashen's scared voice made Rose feel awful. Why was he so spooked?

"Why? Why can't I just go?" Rose asked, upset.

"Egret will kill me. You should know that." Ashen meowed fearfully, getting off of her.

Rose narrowed her eyes. "So you're selfish and don't want to die? Why not come with me? Escape with me."

Ashen winced, shaking his head. "No, not at all. Also, I can't leave. My mate and kits are still there, and who knows what Egret would do to Melody or my kits...?"

Pure horror washed over her like ice-cold water at the realization. "Then we can... take them too. Tonight."

"Rosemary guards during the night. She's Egret's most faithful follower. She'll warn Egret and stop us."

"Rosemary?! I thought-"

"She acts too nice to seem... *monstrous,* right?" Ashen sighed, sitting back on his haunches.

"Yeah..." frowned Rose. "Couldn't we fight back?"

"Not with that Clan cat now. He's trained to fight... correct?"

Rose fell deadly silent, thinking about the time Sootripple tried to murder her. She lifted her eyes, expression grave.

"He's trained to kill."

***

Rose and Ashen both returned with their jaws full of herbs. Rose scanned the clearing for Egret, thankful when the cream she-cat was nowhere in sight. She ducked into her den with Ashen, telling him

to set the herbs on the ground. She thanked him and he left.

"So marigold can go here..." this was crazy. Why did Rose actually care about sorting? Why did she care about gathering herbs for these strangers? Why should she care at all? Egret wouldn't kill her if she refused to heal any cat... right?

*She's murderous, but would she condemn her cats to death if I'm not there to heal them? Ashen certainly knows nothing about healing and Egret, while she didn't show it, seemed almost desperate for me to stay.* Rose sighed, rolling a poppy head under her paw. She just wanted to be back with her family.

The glint of a deathberry made her brain start churning. *I could poison Egret's prey and free Ashen and his mate and kits from this tyrannical cat.* Rose didn't feel comfortable killing another cat. *I'd be no better than Sootripple or... or Mistysong.* Rose had toyed with the idea that she had hallucinated Mistysong, but the she-cat's yellow eyes were clear in her mind. Her distinct silver fur had Rose's blood all over them, no matter how much she tried to wash it off.

Rose grabbed the deathberry delicately between her jaws. She had gotten this deathberry for that purpose, but she'd be stooping just as low as Sootripple or Mistysong, regardless of who she wanted to poison.

She dug in the ground, dropping the poisonous berry in the hole. She scraped dirt over the deathberry, sitting back on her haunches.

She finished sorting comfrey, burdock root, borage leaves, chervil, and poppy seeds. She still needed so many herbs and cobwebs and moss.

Rose padded out of her den, trying to not freeze in mid-step when she saw Sootripple - er, Ripple - sitting outside, eating a bird.

*Act normal. He totally doesn't recognize you.* Rose told herself, forcing her paws to the prey pile. She took a mouse and tried to slip away, but Ripple had noticed her.

"Hey!" Ripple waved his tail in a friendly gesture. Confusion

coursed through her as she stared at him, dumbfounded.

Still wildly confused, she meowed weakly, failing to sound annoyed. Curiosity overtook her. What did he want to say? "What do you want?"

Ripple got up, making Rose cringe away. He frowned at her, halting a few tail-lengths away. "Scared of me or something?" Something in his tone gave it away he knew. He knew exactly why.

Rose lashed her tail and twirled around, reluctant to talk to the cat who tried to kill her. Before he got the chance to ask her to come back, she dived into her den, trying to calm the rising panic in her chest.

When she glanced over her shoulder, Ripple wasn't there. Deep sadness that she had been ignoring for a while finally affected her. Tears climbed to her eyes as she stared up at the skylight, ears flattened. She missed her Clan.

*StarClan, if you can hear my thoughts where I am, I just want to go home.*

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# Chapter Eleven

***CHAPTER ELEVEN***

***HAZELPAW | THUNDERCLAN CAMP***

Shellpaw must be losing his mind *right now.* Hazelpaw reflected, watching Brightcloud carry a mouse over to Littlewish's tight, cramped den. Brightcloud's eyes were friendly when she gave it to Littlewish, meowing a few words before she was shoved away by Ivypelt.

*I want to help her. I want to help Shellpaw.* Hazelpaw sighed, dropping her head. Everything was so painfully hard that she almost just wanted to give up. She wanted to be a kit again, curled up at her mother's belly without a care in the world. But now she did care, and she cared about a different cat's business.

"...This doesn't feel right, Honeypool." Cloverheart's concerned mew drew her attention to the gray tabby. "It doesn't feel... just."

Honeypool nodded, resting his tail-tip on Cloverheart's shoulder. "I don't agree either, but I'm afraid this is the only way we can approach this. ShadowClan must realize Littlewish is a danger and if they want her back just to exile her, they can retrieve her." His voice held no disgust for Littlewish, just pity.

Cloverheart flattened her ears. "She's not a killer! I know her; we're friends. She has no intention to kill a cat."

"Some cats are good at deceiving. Littlewish has deceived you and now you're too wound up in her lies to see what she really is." Honeypool patiently and kindly explained, expression guarded but warm as he watched Cloverheart crumple to the ground in realization.

Hazelpaw looked away, heart aching for Cloverheart. The poor she-cat was in pieces now.

"I have a patrol to lead. Would you like to join get, perhaps get some fresh air?" Honeypool nosed Cloverheart's flank. The she-cat mutely nodded and got to her paws, following Honeypool. Hazelpaw twitched her ear, then looked at her paws.

*I don't believe Littlewish is evil. But if Honeypool has been manipulated into thinking so, what will change his mind?* Hazelpaw scanned the ground furiously, claws flexing. A thought that had never occurred to her made its appearance, burning in her mind. *Did Shellpaw deceive me?*

Pacing back-and-forth, she began thinking through everything from the top.

Dewpaw's happy mew cut her out of her intense focus a few minutes later. "Hazelpaw! Hazelpaw! Where's Lynxpaw?"

Instead of answering her question, Hazelpaw shot a question at her. "Why?"

"I have great news to tell him!" Dewpaw bounced up and down, eyes gleaming.

"What is it?" Dewpaw's enthusiasm made Hazelpaw's tail lash with excitement. What could be so important and exciting that made Dewpaw so joyful?

"Echopaw, Stormpaw, and Beechpaw are becoming warriors!" Dewpaw burst.

Hazelpaw frowned. "I don't get it."

"Exactly. That's why it's for Lynxpaw." Dewpaw meowed, her tone teasing.

Hazelpaw twitched her whiskers knowingly. "I see now."

Dewpaw hopped away when she spotted Lynxpaw, bidding Hazelpaw farewell.

Hazelpaw purred, glad her sister was happy right now. Lynxpaw seemed to be entertained by her too, whiskers twitching and eyes

glittering with amusement.

"Hazelpaw?" Aqua's quiet, gentle voice made Hazelpaw look over her shoulder.

"Yes, Aqua?" Hazelpaw prompted.

"Would you mind watching my kits for a couple minutes? I want to stretch my legs." Aqua tilted her head.

"Of course!" Hazelpaw purred, realizing she hadn't played with Aqua's kits in quite a while.

Aqua looked immensely grateful. "Thank you. I will be back soon."

Hazelpaw waved Aqua goodbye with her tail before turning around to find kits launching themselves at her face. A short yelp escaped her jaws as she crashed to the ground.

"You had no clue!" Willowkit meowed proudly. They had learned how to speak properly, so Hazelpaw could finally understand them.

Hazelpaw struggled weakly, laughing. "I had no clue." Hazelpaw repeated. "Your stalking skills are all improving."

"We could be apprentices right now!" Raccoonkit boasted, puffing her chest out. "I'd get Honeypool as my mentor."

"Nuh-uh," Puddlekit narrowed her eyes playfully, launching herself at Raccoonkit, both rolling off of Hazelpaw. "Honeypool will request to be my mentor."

Hazelpaw rolled her eyes. The likelihood that Honeypool would willingly train one of Aqua's kits was low since he was deputy and was trying to keep his Clan together through rough times. Nectarstar wasn't doing a great job of being their leader, so everyone turned to Honeypool.

"Hazelpaw, can you teach me a battle move?" Raccoonkit's eyes shone and she padded closer to Hazelpaw, dropping her voice drastically. "So I get a head start and Honeypool sees my skill."

"You meant *us* instead of *yourself,* right?" Willowkit griped, batting Raccoonkit's flicking tail.

Raccoonkit snickered sarcastically. "Of course, Willowkit."

Hazelpaw watched Willowkit pounce on Raccoonkit, letting out a ferocious kit-yowl, pummeling Raccoonkit's blue-gray belly with sheathed paws.

"That'll teach you!" Willowkit puffed her chest out, licking her chest fur proudly.

Puddlekit cut Raccoonkit off just as the blue-gray she-kit was sucking in a breath to retort. "Seriously, Hazelpaw, can you teach us something? Anything?"

Hazelpaw tipped her head to the side thoughtfully. "Would you three like to learn how to replace old nests with new ones?-"

"No!" the three kits shrieked in terror. Hazelpaw smirked at their reactions.

"Okay, okay, fine. I was pulling your tails anyway. Did you three practice the paw swipe I taught you a while back?"

"Um, sort of. It's still confusing." Raccoonkit admitted, shuffling her paws in the dirt.

Hazelpaw went over the paw swipe again, ordering them to do it on each other. She watched them and nodded when they waited for her approval.

"What else! What else!" they cheered, circling around her, eyes bright and tails lashing.

Hazelpaw didn't know what else was suitable for their age, but Aqua's sudden arrival saved her.

"Aqua!" Puddlekit meowed happily.

Hazelpaw took one look at her and knew something was wrong. The she-cat's look was haunted and the patrol Honeypool had led

was behind her. Honeypool's expression was particularly upset.

*Another death.* Hazelpaw felt awful for her deputy.

Aqua hurried away from the patrol when she spotted her kits, putting on a cheerful face.

"My kittens! How have you three been? Did you treat Hazelpaw well?"

"We did!" Willowkit promised.

"Was your walk nice? I want to go out there soon..." mewed Raccoonkit.

"Same! It'll be so-"

Aqua frowned at Puddlekit. "Puddlekit, what did I say about 'it'll' and anything associated with that. You say 'it will.'"

Puddlekit ducked her head. "Sorry..."

Aqua nudged her kit's cheek. "I am not mad, Puddlekit."

"ThunderClan!" Nectarstar's rather groggy yowl made Hazelpaw shift her attention to him. He parted his jaws into a large yawn before addressing the gathering ThunderClan warriors. "Another one of our warriors have been... killed."

Outraged yowls filled the air until Honeypool silenced them, eyes ablaze. Cats shrunk away from the deputy, not used to this side of him.

"I'm sorry to say... but Rootspeckle was killed." Nectarstar didn't seem affected by the calico's death at all.

Hazelpaw hadn't spoken to Rootspeckle much, but the calico had been sweet and caring. It was a pity she was gone.

"Who killed her?" Maplebranch wailed. "My precious kit!"

"It was a rogue." Honeypool snarled. "One with cream fur."

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# Chapter Twelve

***CHAPTER TWELVE***

***ROSE | ROGUE BASE***

*Every day repeated what happened* in her dreams. Did that mean she could see the future? No, not exactly, since there were always one or two events differed.

Rose buried her face into her tail. She didn't want to get up. What if she just laid there the whole day? Her dream would be false. She certainly didn't want this dream happening. There was one part at the end that she dreaded...

"Rose!" Egret's harsh hiss made Rose jump to her paws. "Follow me."

Rose swallowed the rising anxiety in her throat and forced herself to follow Egret out of the base.

Even though she already knew where they were heading, it felt right to ask. "Where are we going?"

"It shouldn't matter to you." Egret sneered. That was the exact answer dream-Egret had given her.

Getting attacked by a fox in her dream was still fresh in her mind, replaying again and again. She didn't want to go that way.

Hoping she wasn't testing Egret's tolerance, she asked another question. "Why did you bring me along?"

"To collect herbs." Egret glanced over her shoulder, eyes narrowed and ears flattened. "What are you, a kitten? Stop asking me questions."

Rose ducked her head, muttering an apology. Egret and Rose approached a thick forest. ThunderClan's scent wafted over.

*The fox is coming. I just know it. I know how to avoid it, though.* Rose's paws tingled with anticipation and fear.

"Oh, um, Egret, there's herbs over there-" Rose tried to gesture to the right of her, but Egret growled at her.

"We're going to find herbs where I'm going." Egret plowed through the brown plants, dodging any snow piles that remained.

Rose sighed inaudibly. "My apologies."

Egret didn't acknowledge her. Instead, the skinny she-cat halted, tasting the air.

"Juniper berries, over there." Egret angled her ears to a bush of juniper berries and on a tree beside it was covered in cobwebs. Rose was surprised she knew about those, but she didn't show it. "Stay in this area while I scout around."

"No!" cried Rose.

Egret scowled at her. "Are you stopping me from scouting around?" Every word in her sentence dripped with venom.

Rose could only hear her heartbeat pounding. "N-No. I, uh, almost just tripped."

Egret looked unconvinced, but she probably decided it wasn't worth her time to fight with Rose. "Whatever." The cream she-cat padded away.

*Fox. There's a fox around here.* Rose felt bile rise up into her throat as she tested dry leaves, trying to find one that didn't crack on her. *I'm in a different area, but I'm sure it'll come.* Her fur was on end, waiting for that guttural growl.

Silence. Silence for as far as she could hear, until she heard a yowl of agony.

*Egret! Did she find the fox?* Rose leapt in the direction of Egret's yowl. Her paws pounded on the cold ground, determined to find Egret. Unexpectedly, Egret jumped out of the bushes ahead of Rose.

"Go, go!" Egret snapped, paws and muzzle bloody. Rose ran after her, eyes wide.

"Rootspeckle!" a cat screeched. "No! No, she's dead!"

Rose's breath hitched in her throat. Egret led her here to kill a cat.

*What about the fox?* Rose slowed down, coming to a halt. Egret hadn't noticed and ran until she was swallowed up by the forest. She turned back around, racing back to where Egret had jumped out in front of her. She crouched, dabbing at some blood in the bush. She didn't like the idea that Egret had killed a *Clan* cat.

*Why did she do it?* Rose crawled under the bush, arriving at the bloody scene. A calico lay there, blood trickling from her jaws. A cat had screeched her name, yet her body was still here. Why?

It looked as though a fox had killed her. One of her legs bent at an unnatural position, making Rose gag. She turned away, hearing voices off in the distance, probably coming to retrieve the dead warrior.

She went under the bush, but her unkempt fur got snagged on a branch. She tugged at it, panicking.

"...believe she died..." a cat was coming. By the sound of it, there were a few more cats.

"I know-"

"Wait. I hear something." That was one voice she recognized. Honeypool.

Any chatter stopped. Rose stopped struggling, pulling her tail into the bush.

Something stomped on her tail, though. Rose let out a strangled cry, thrashing. Branches snagged and got caught in her fur as she was pulled out.

"Rosepaw?" Honeypool's incredulous tone made Rose feel slightly

better. "Why are you here? Where's Rowanmask?"

"I was collecting herbs." Did they not know of her disappearance?

*WindClan must've decided to tell their misfortunes when the next Gathering comes up.* Rose blinked, staring into Honeypool's green eyes.

"It's not against my code." Rose added weakly.

"I know." Honeypool meowed softly, picking twigs and branches out of her fur as though he was her father. "But here, of all places? Didn't you smell the blood when you were gathering herbs? It could've been dangerous if whoever committed this had still been around."

Rose was becoming overwhelmed by the strong scent of blood and processed his words slowly. This had never happened before.

Honeypool's concerned voice was the last thing she heard before she fainted. "You two, help her back to her Clan."

*My Clan.*

***

"Is she going to wake up soon?"

"Stop asking me. It makes me nervous, too."

"She's my kit, I can ask however many times I need."

Kestrelheart's voice made Rose feel warm. She was home.

She stirred, opening her eyes slowly.

"Rosepaw? Rosepaw!" Kestrelheart noticed immediately, purring loudly and licking her face. "You're alive!" her mother burst into sobs. "Don't scare me ever again!"

Rowanmask was gazing at her, eyes alight with joy. Rose - no, Rose*paw* - grinned at him.

"How did you come back from the dead?" Kestrelheart asked through her tears of joy.

"I never died." Rosepaw twitched her whiskers. "A group of rogues saved me."

"I'm so grateful that they did." Kestrelheart's comment made Rosepaw's tail flick.

Rosepaw tried to get up, surprised when the world spun before her. She sat back down, nostrils flaring.

"Cloverheart told me you passed out. What happened? Why were you on ThunderClan's territory?" Rowanmask asked.

Rosepaw curled up, closing her eyes, suddenly wanting to sleep. "I'll tell you... later..."

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# Chapter Thirteen

***CHAPTER THIRTEEN***

***SHELLPAW | SHADOWCLAN CAMP***

*No matter how hard Seedpaw* or Rootflower tried to comfort him, they never succeeded. He struggled to fall asleep at night and never ate his prey, always staring at the camp entrance. Snakestar hadn't acted yet, saying ThunderClan would surely hand Littlewish back. Shellpaw had lost count of the days, but it surely had been over three days.

"Snakestar, we really should go get Littlewish." Shellpaw heard Volepounce suggest.

"Why?" Snakestar grunted, gruff as ever.

Volepounce sent a glance in Shellpaw's direction. Shellpaw made sure he looked away when he did.

"We have an apprentice who needs to be assessed and other cats are affected by her absence." The pale brown tom reasoned with the old tom. "We can't wait any longer. They're clearly not handing her back any time soon."

Snakestar frowned at the ground. "Fine, fine! I shall go with you and... Yarrownose."

Shellpaw stood up, marching over. "I'd like to go, too."

Snakestar gazed at him, making Shellpaw shrink back. The dark brown leader huffed. "You can come along."

*Yes!* Shellpaw caught Seedpaw's eye. She looked somewhat worried but gave him a half-hearted smile.

"Yarrownose!" Volepounce called the splotched warrior over. She looked directly at them, head cocked in confusion. "You're coming

on our patrol to retrieve Littlewish."

"Oh, okay." Yarrownose trotted over. Snakestar led the way out of camp briskly, easily navigating his way through the twisting pines. Meanwhile, Shellpaw was dazed, stumbling over roots and stepping wrong on the littered nettles. They were getting his mentor back! Plus, Mistysong would be brought to justice.

It seemed like a few seconds had breezed by when Snakestar halted at the ThunderClan border. However, it seemed like forever for a ThunderClan patrol to show up.

"Why is no cat coming?" Yarrownose grumbled, tasting the air. "Their borders are stale."

"Let's just go." Snakestar trotted across the invisible line warily. Shellpaw bounced after him, hoping Littlewish had been treated well in her days imprisoned in ThunderClan.

*What if they starved her or tormented her?* Shellpaw's fur rippled uneasily.

"I think... ah, here's the hole." Snakestar dipped down into a hole, his tail the last thing seen. Volepounce went after, then Yarrownose. Shellpaw was close on Yarrownose's tail.

"ThunderClan! It's an ambush! Oh - wait, never mind." A cat was speaking to Snakestar, spiked fur flattening. "Here for Littlewish, I presume?"

"Don't know why else we'd be dropping in." Snakestar huffed. Shellpaw scanned the camp, noticing cats grieving.

The warrior who was talking to him ignored his remark and angled her ears over to a dark corner of camp. "Here she comes."

Littlewish was following a ThunderClan warrior out, eyes bright with joy when she spotted her Clanmates.

"Before we go, we'd like to accuse a certain cat." Snakestar meowed slowly as Littlewish joined Shellpaw. "Mistysong killed Coaltooth."

ThunderClan cats began yowling at the ShadowClan cats to get out.

"We've already been over this." Mistysong snarled from her den entrance, cold eyes focused on Shellpaw. "Did your little apprentice feed you false information?"

"He told us and we investigated. Your scent was all over him and we found your fur." Snakestar growled, eyes narrowed. "You held my warrior here for no reason!"

Nectarstar watched from the sidelines, finally rising. He looked conflicted, but he met Snakestar's gaze steadily. "We will question our medicine cat, but you can't walk in here and claim you scented her on Coaltooth's body."

"All of ShadowClan will agree Mistysong is the cat who killed Coaltooth. Do you notice how many of your warriors look uncertain?" Snakestar questioned, sweeping his tail.

Nectarstar glanced around, sighing. "Like I said, we'll question her. If she's guilty, I'll exile her. If not, ShadowClan will surely regret convicting our medicine cat." His threat ensured bad things would happen.

Honeypool flicked his tail-tip. "Doeblaze, Hollymoon, escort them back to their border."

Shellpaw's blood ran cold when he met Hollymoon's gaze. She was devoid of emotion, walking right past him. The two ThunderClan warriors led them out, deadly silent.

Littlewish stayed next to his side, awfully distant and unfocused, stuck in her own thoughts.

Shellpaw bumped her flank with his own, snapping her out of her trance. "Hey."

Littlewish looked at him fondly. "Shellpaw, how I've missed you."

Shellpaw smiled sheepishly, shuffling his paws. "I've missed you too. You're like my mother to me."

"You *are* a son to me." Littlewish nudged his cheek. "How have you been coping?"

Shellpaw felt his pelt twitch with discomfort, so he simply murmured, "I've been doing okay..." he didn't want Littlewish knowing he had trouble eating and sleeping just because she had been gone. "Did ThunderClan treat you well?"

"Yeah. Some." Littlewish's gaze darkened. "Some of my opinions on cats have changed, however." The way she ended her sentence - the way her voice considerably darkened - told Shellpaw he shouldn't ask.

They talked all the way until they got to camp, where Littlewish followed Snakestar into his den.

Anxiety rolled in his stomach as he waited for Littlewish to reappear. He didn't know why, something just felt off now. Littlewish was back, but that lingering anxiety and paranoia that had been with him ever since she was gone was hanging on, telling him whatever was bothering him wasn't over yet. He saw Littlewish exit the den, but several ShadowClan warriors came up to her, welcoming her back. He sighed, looking at his paws.

"Shellpaw!" Littlewish's cheerful mew made him lift his head from his paws. "I discussed your warrior name with Snakestar, and we've decided that you have earned it. Your assessment has been pushed back too many days and I know you don't need to be assessed."

Any anxiety vanished in thin air. He wanted to jump and parade around Littlewish, but he stood still, tail whisking happily.

"Your ceremony should be happening any minute now." Littlewish ran her tail over his spine. "You know, while I was... held in ThunderClan camp," her eyes flashed warily, "I thought of so many wonderful warrior names for you. One stuck out to me, and I told Snakestar the name. I hope you like it."

*It's typically tradition the leader chooses the name, but I'd prefer Littlewish's choice anytime.* Shellpaw stared eagerly at his mentor.

Soon he'd be her rank and treated the same, regarded with respect and couldn't be bossed around.

"Clan meeting!" Snakestar's caterwaul bounced off the walls. Shellpaw sought out Seedpaw, finding her trailing after Tawnythorn, head tilted.

"You know what this meeting is about?" Seedpaw whispered to him.

"My warrior name," saying those words sent anticipation coursing through his body.

Seedpaw gasped, eyes sparkling with happiness for him. "I'm so happy for you! I heard Littlewish is also back."

"She is." Shellpaw glanced over his shoulder, hearing silence. "Uh oh, I better get up there." It was extremely awkward walking past the crowd, and even more awkward when Snakestar watched him sit down, expression guarded.

"Littlewish," Snakestar took his eyes off of Shellpaw, "do you believe your apprentice has learned the way of being a warrior?"

"I do." Littlewish beamed at Shellpaw.

"Then I say these words before StarClan. Shellpaw, your new name is..."

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# Chapter Fourteen

***CHAPTER FOURTEEN***

***HAZELPAW | THUNDERCLAN CAMP***

*The scent of ShadowClan lingered* in the camp as the Clan gathered uneasily around Nectarstar and Mistysong. ThunderClan's prideful medicine cat looked completely relaxed, meeting the gaze of every cat. Something twisted in Hazelpaw's gut when Mistysong met her dark green eyes.

"I find it rubbish," a warrior who went by the name of Vixenheart spat, "that Mistysong would even attempt to kill a warrior. She doesn't learn any complex moves for StarClan's sake!"

Mistysong padded up to the tortoiseshell and looked Vixenheart directly in the eye. "I did kill that filthy ShadowClan warrior." She drew every word out. "But, but," she shushed every cat who gasped and accused her, "it was self defense. I didn't mean to." Something in her tone and eyes told Hazelpaw the opposite. "He attacked me because I was trespassing, but I'm allowed to!"

"Are you sure that amends for what you have done?" Brightcloud meowed testily. Hazelpaw nodded hastily to her words.

"No, and I believe I should be punished." Mistysong walked over to Nectarstar next. "Well, Nectarstar?"

Nectarstar frowned at her, seemingly confused.

*What is confusing?* Hazelpaw didn't understand *why* her leader was confused. *Just punish her! She even asked for it.*

"I don't think a punishment is required." Wrencry, a pale gray tabby tom, objected. "You were just protecting yourself."

Mistysong shot him a thankful look.

"I second that!"

"Me too!"

"Well... some minor punishment should be put in place."

"We'll settle this with a vote," interjected Honeypool smoothly, devoid of any emotion, "if you think Mistysong's actions were unjust and she deserves a punishment, go by the entrance of camp. If you think she does not deserve a punishment, go by the medicine cat den."

The Clan split up. Hazelpaw met Dewpaw's and Lynxpaw's uncertain gaze, but when Smokelight, their father, stopped by the two, murmuring something to them, they followed him to the medicine cat. Hazelpaw spotted Turtlecreek by the entrance and bounded over. The group by the entrance was quite small, consisting of herself, Turtlecreek, Brightcloud, Echopaw, Beechpaw, Cloverheart, and Larchtail.

*Dewpaw and Lynxpaw would be over here right now.* Hazelpaw frowned, wondering what Smokelight told them.

"It has been decided." Nectarstar meowed. "She will go without a punishment." Hazelpaw sighed, eyes wandering over to Honeypool. Did he feel this was right?

Honeypool was gazing intensely in her direction, and when she followed his gaze, it was locked with Turtlecreek's. She looked away, hearing pawsteps approach her.

"Hazelpaw, we're sorry we didn't come over here. Smokelight... told us that side was the right decision." Lynxpaw explained, pointing with his tail to the medicine cat den. "We didn't want him to be angry at us if we went over to this side, so we followed."

"Oh," was all Hazelpaw could say. That was all she could think of. Dewpaw and Lynxpaw shared a glance and padded away.

Suddenly, a thought crossed her mind. *Why did Palefang think Mistysong deserved no punishment?* Her mentor had told her she didn't think Mistysong was innocent. Did she change her mind?

Hazelpaw sought out her cream-furred mentor, brows furrowed. Palefang was chatting solemnly with Runningsky, shaking her head sadly from time to time.

"Palefang." It took effort to keep the shakiness out of her mew when she interrupted the discussion.

Palefang sent her silencing glare, finishing her talk with Runningsky. When he walked away, she turned gruffly to Hazelpaw, annoyed.

"What's so important that you had to interrupt in our conversation?" Palefang questioned, tone quite cross and impatient.

Hazelpaw suddenly didn't think it was a good idea to ask Palefang why she believed Mistysong deserved no punishment. Palefang seemed crabby, and that pointless question shriveled up on her tongue.

*Maybe she was tricked by Mistysong's lie. Or... or I am too stubborn to think anything else but that Mistysong is evil.* That thought sat with her.

"Well?" Palefang prompted.

"N-Never mind." Before she could be quipped, she turned tail and ran to Lynxpaw and Dewpaw, who were trying to cheer up Brightcloud, the sister of Rootspeckle. "Lynxpaw, Dewpaw, I need to speak to you," she hissed quietly.

Dewpaw glared at her, stroking Brightcloud's back with her tail. "We're a little busy if you couldn't tell." It was typical for Dewpaw to be upset. Hazelpaw cringed away.

"I'll talk to her." Lynxpaw informed Dewpaw, following Hazelpaw to a secluded area in camp.

"Lynxpaw, tell me something. Do you find Mistysong... odd?"

Lynxpaw frowned at the ground. "I do, but Smokelight says I shouldn't. I shouldn't because it benefits him."

"What does that even mean?" Hazelpaw cried out loud.

"I don't know, but he warned us not to cross the line." The words coming out Lynxpaw's mouth sounded like a kit babbling. Nonsense. That was what she heard.

"I don't understand." *What line are we not supposed to cross? What does he expect from my siblings and myself?*

Lynxpaw shrugged unhelpfully.

"Okay, let me rephrase this. What did you personally think about Mistysong before Smokelight chatted with you?" Hazelpaw stared him down, tail-tip twitching.

"She's sketchy, still is. Those weren't cat scratches on her pelt when those two ShadowClan cats came." Lynxpaw answered, voice lowering. "She didn't kill that ShadowClan cat in self defense either. I can't prove it to you, but-"

"It's a gut feeling." Hazelpaw finished his sentence, grinning when Lynxpaw chuckled, agreeing.

Suddenly, her brother became very still, expression distracted. Hazelpaw waved her tail in front of his face, snapping him out of his sudden trance.

"Sorry," he licked his chest fur, "it's just... so much has been going on. I miss being kits, carefree and everyone was well. Now... well, death is around every corner, even after Sootripple's exile. Apparently a rogue has decided to start stirring up trouble, too. I just want to go back to when I didn't need to have a care in the world."

Hazelpaw purred bittersweetly, remembering memories of her, Lynxpaw, and Dewpaw playing Clans or hide-and-seek. Now they had no time to, but it would be immature and embarrassing if they started playing hide-and-seek at this age and maturity.

"I agree." Hazelpaw rested her head on his shoulder. "But I wouldn't want to go back to being a kit."

Lynxpaw shifted, forcing Hazelpaw to raise her head off of his shoulder. "How come?"

"I'd rather be fighting and providing for my Clan than playing with moss."

Lynxpaw laughed. "When you put it that way, I guess I can see why."

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# Chapter Fifteen

***CHAPTER FIFTEEN***

***ROSELIGHT | WINDCLAN CAMP***

*Everything felt like a dream* the next few days. She was home. It was hard to believe and hard to digest. However, there was something deep inside of Roselight that never went away.

Guilt.

And she knew exactly why.

Lilac's death was for nothing. She left Ashen and his mate and kits under Egret's cruel rule. What had she done? Left them without a second thought when she was found.

Her kin tried to spend as much time as they could with her, but Roselight was always too distant and distracted to notice them. Kestrelheart tried to pry information out of her, but Roselight didn't want to share what she had gone through. She'd just be pitied and babied more.

Rowanmask had restricted her from going outside of camp, and Beestar had backed him up. That angered her, but perhaps it truly was for the better.

Dawnstream and Duskface visited her often, but those visits had gotten less frequent when she'd only mutely nod or shake her head.

Every cat in the Clan knew she'd seen things she could never shake off. Rowanmask tried so hard to help her, showing her Tulipfoot's kits, but that only broke her heart, knowing she had been the reason her aunt had died.

Roselight's tongue ran dry as she stared at the rabbit at her paws, brought to her by Lightningpaw.

"You should really eat it." Kestrelheart's worried voice went in one ear and out the other. Roselight shook her head. "Rowanmask, are there no herbs to help her?"

"I've tried, and it's as though they have no effect on her." Rowanmask solemnly replied.

Roselight's shoulders sagged. "I have a question." That was probably one of her longest sentences since she had come back.

"Ask away." Kestrelheart meowed, washing Roselight's ear.

"Is it... right to kill a cat if it were for revenge?" Her voice was dull.

Rowanmask's eyes widened and Kestrelheart stiffened.

"Well?" Roselight prompted, Egret flashing through her mind.

"An honorable warrior never kills..." Kestrelheart started out timidly, "but I would kill a certain cat for revenge, but I don't have the guts to." Her voice was tense.

That sparked some interest into Roselight. "Who?"

"Honeypool." Kestrelheart hissed.

Rowanmask and Roselight alike were taken back. "Why?"

"He killed my mother. *Our* mother. It looked as though a fox had killed her." Kestrelheart looked at Rowanmask meaningfully. "He did it for revenge as well. He did it on accident, I could tell by the surprise in his eyes, but I will never forget that moment. She died before my eyes."

Roselight soaked up her words, trying to push down a weird feeling.

Suddenly, everything dawned on the medicine cat. She let out a gasp, standing up.

"I'm such a mouse-brain!" she cried out.

"What?" Kestrelheart seemed stunned.

"StarClan has sent me so many omens and yet I was so blind..." she dropped her head.

Rowanmask ordered Kestrelheart out, saying this was medicine cat business. Her former mentor turned to her, confusion bright in his green eyes. "Roselight, what omens?"

She let out a dry laugh. "So many omens. I'll name a few. Fox. Tainted honey. And there are so many more."

"I'm not tracking with you."

"Honeypool. Honeypool isn't the cat we think he is. Why else would that honey be tainted that one day?" That one day when she went out to get honey with Duskface, the honey had been full of leaves and twigs. "And he killed Rootspeckle with... with Egret. He kills like a fox." Rootspeckle's body flashed in her mind and Kestrelheart's words repeated in her ears: *"...looked as though a fox had killed her..."*

"Rootspeckle? When did she die?" Rowanmask sounded astonished and doubtful. "I think you're just exhausted, Roselight. You're becoming deranged."

"No! No! Honeypool is a threat!" Roselight grew panicked, more dots connecting in her head. "A-And Mistysong. Her too."

Rowanmask finally snapped out of it and hissed. "Roselight, listen to me right now." The tone of his voice spooked Roselight. He had never spoken to her like this. "You are exhausted and not thinking straight. You will go to sleep right now." He grabbed three poppy seeds, one more than usual, but when she reluctantly lapped them up, it packed a punch.

"But... listen to *me*." Roselight spoke slowly, eyelids fluttering with effort to stay open as she walked over to her nest. "You've been manipulated. We all have been." That was when she closed her eyes.

***

Roselight yawned, opening her eyes. She scanned the den. No sign of Rowanmask. No sign of any cat. Typically, there was always one cat with her.

It took some time to remember what had happened before she napped.

*Oh, that's right.* Roselight grimaced. *Honeypool.*

But with a clearer mind, she wondered how she brewed up such an atrocious idea. Honeypool was so understanding, patient, kind...

*Roselight, are you hearing yourself?* Roselight's mind sneered. *He's just acting.*

But how could such a charming and empathetic deputy act so well? And how'd he charm so many cats so easily?

Roselight stumbled outside, shivering. It was unusually cold, and she noticed fresh snow on the ground. Cats were huddled outside, trying to warm themselves up. The apprentices were play-fighting to keep the frigid cold out. Rowanmask was nowhere in camp, but Kestrelheart was. Kestrelheart noticed her and padded over.

"Roselight, are you feeling better?" Her mother asked, nosing her cheek.

"I've been feeling well for ages."

"Are you sure? Rowanmask is fairly certain you have a fever." Kestrelheart ushered her back inside. "It'll become worse if you stand out there."

"Fever?" Rosepaw didn't feel hot.

Kestrelheart sighed, shaking her head. "Rowanmask told me what you told him. You're obviously sick if you think that..." she lowered her voice, "Honeypool is evil. I know I said I'd kill him, but that's just because he accidentally killed my mother. Any cat would feel that way after watching a cat you hold close die in front of you. That's just our nature."

"He didn't accidentally kill her." Roselight argued.

Kestrelheart's jaw was taut. "I'm not going to fight you. You're sick and this phase will pass."

"It won't." She'd never see Honeypool the same way now. Those enchanting green eyes, charming smile, his bubbly personality...

Kestrelheart let her muscles relax. "I see I can't change your mind. I understand, actually. But Roselight, why won't you tell me what happened when you were gone? You said something about Egret when you were on about Honeypool? And something about Mistysong."

"It's painful to talk about." She ignored Kestrelheart's last statement.

"I'm sure it's more painful to keep it on your shoulders alone." Kestrelheart was clearly trying her hardest to get Roselight's secrets out.

"You're just going to call me crazy."

"Tell me, please."

"Fine." Roselight inhaled slowly and launched into her story.

---

*wow how interesting. did anyone see this coming? and/or did anyone notice that the tainted honey was an omen? throughout the book one and two i've actually made very subtle hints that honeypool isn't one to trust, but like i said, you probably breezed right over them unknowingly because they're super subtle.*

*anyway, i really enjoyed writing this chapter.*

*-artemis*

# Chapter Sixteen

***CHAPTER SIXTEEN***

***HAZELPAW | THUNDERCLAN CAMP***

Multiple days had passed ever since, well, basically everything, and Hazelpaw had relaxed a little ever since the ShadowClan-Mistysong frenzy. During the past few days, Stormpaw, Echopaw, and Beechpaw had all earned their names and were now called Stormmist, Echoberry, and Beechleg. Now, she sat with Beechleg and Echoberry, chatting about the most random things. Prey, the upcoming half-moon meeting, other cats.

"Shh, you two," murmured Beechleg, eyes sliding past Hazelpaw. "Looks like Nectarstar is making an announcement."

"Cats of ThunderClan, gather around!" the gold ThunderClan leader yowled, waiting for the Clan to crowd around. "It has come to my attention that Aqua will be leaving us today."

*What? It hasn't been a full moon!* Hazelpaw's fur stood up straight. Why was Aqua going? Were her kits able to eat prey without problems? They had been learning to chew, but Aqua surely wanted to spend every day with them before she went, right?

Her eyes trailed over to Honeypool, whose eyes were narrowed with despise at Aqua. *What's happening?*

Aqua looked particularly frightened. She looked exactly as she had looked on the day Rootspeckle's death was announced.

"I have gathered you all to say your goodbyes to her. Her kits will be taken care of by Ravenwhi-"

"I'm not taking care of filthy loners." Ravenwhisker wounded her way through the crowd, spitting.

Nectarstar let out a frustrated sigh, but Honeypool intervened

just as his brother sucked a breath in. "Cherryfern, I hope you wouldn't mind?"

Cherryfern shook her head, eyes gleaming with joy. "I'll take them in as though they were my own." Her tail brushed her swollen belly.

Honeypool nodded, eyes flashing when he glanced back to Aqua. "Say your goodbyes quickly, Aqua. After Aqua goes, I want to lead a patrol with Turtlecreek, Hollymoon, and Ivypelt."

Cats started walking up to Aqua, bidding her farewell. Hazelpaw padded up to her as the crowd dispersed, right behind her mother.

Turtlecreek and Aqua were talking quietly, drifting away from the crowd. Hazelpaw stalked after them, curious what they were chatting about.

"...kicked out because I saw *him* kill Rootspeckle." Fear was emitting off of Aqua like waves swallowing up Hazelpaw. "Will my kits be safe here?"

"I'll look after them with Cherryfern." Turtlecreek promised, glancing over her shoulder. Her eyes landed on Hazelpaw and she froze. "Hazelpaw, how much of that did you hear?"

"Who killed Rootspeckle?" Hazelpaw answered with a question. "You said *he* and the rogue was a she-cat."

Aqua inhaled, about to tell her, but Turtlecreek interrupted her. "I can't tell you."

"What?" All Hazelpaw felt was extreme - very extreme - shock and confusion. Aqua also seemed bewildered.

"I can't." Turtlecreek's voice cracked. "He's listening."

Hazelpaw looked over her shoulder. The closest cats to them were Honeypool and Sweetberry, but they seemed to be in very deep conversation. There was also Smokelight, but he was observing the Clan closely.

"Who? Who is listening?" Hazelpaw frowned, but Turtlecreek shook her head.

Suddenly, pawsteps sounded behind her. Hazelpaw twisted her neck.

Nectarstar approached slowly, eyes trained on Aqua. "It's time you go."

Aqua nodded and got up. "Goodbye, Hazelpaw." Aqua stared into her eyes sorrowfully, shaking her head.

Hazelpaw tracked Aqua's movement as she padded through the exit, the shadows swallowing her up.

"It's time for the patrol." Honeypool had broke apart from Sweetberry (who looked after him longingly) and walked over to Turtlecreek. "Find Hollymoon for me and meet us by the exit."

Turtlecreek nodded stiffly. She got up and swept past Hazelpaw, disappearing into the warriors den. Honeypool glanced at Hazelpaw, smiling, then turned away, walking toward the exit.

Hazelpaw felt a pair of eyes still on her, however, but when she turned around to face the Clan, no cat was looking in her direction.

A sense of unease settled itself in her belly as she sat down. Who? Who was the cat Turtlecreek and Aqua were talking about? All she knew was that it was a tom.

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Hazelpaw just finished her vole when Hollymoon burst through the camp entrance, eyes wide.

"Turtlecreek's dead!"

The whole world seemed to slow down when Hazelpaw met Dewpaw's and Lynxpaw's eyes. Their jaws were agape and their ears were pinned to their skull in disbelief.

*My mother is... dead?* Hazelpaw's throat constricted as tears built

up in her eyes. The camp became blurry with tears as Turtlecreek's body was carried into camp by Honeypool and Ivypelt.

Hollymoon said more words, but all Hazelpaw could focus on was her mother's limp body. She had promised to see their warrior ceremonies. Promised to congratulate them.

Hazelpaw's paws began to numb as she rushed over to Turtlecreek's body, only to be blocked by warriors. She squeezed her way through, not apologizing when she shoved some into others. Now set on the ground, Turtlecreek's body was a true horror.

Her neck was at an odd angle and blood trickled from her jaws. It almost looked as though some wild beast had gotten to her. A fox, perhaps.

Dewpaw let out a wail first, collapsing next to Turtlecreek's corpse, ignoring Mistysong's request to move so she could slather lavender all over.

"Wh-what killed her?" Lynxpaw's voice caught Hazelpaw's ear and she looked at her silver-furred brother.

"The cream rogue that killed Rootspeckle." Hollymoon answered gravely.

Hazelpaw stumbled over to Dewpaw, shoving her face into Turtlecreek's bloody, slightly warm fur.

"She promised to be there when we became warriors." Dewpaw whispered to Hazelpaw, voice cracking with each word.

Hazelpaw's whiskers trembled with sadness. "She was the only one we could look to."

A paw touched her shoulder. Hazelpaw looked at the one who touched her.

Palefang gazed sadly at Hazelpaw. "Mistysong needs you two to move."

"I don't want to." Hazelpaw, even though she verbally disagreed, reluctantly scooted backwards. Dewpaw noticed her and did the same, sniffling. Lynxpaw sat behind them, still in shock.

Hazelpaw scanned the crowd, stopping on one. Smokelight. He seemed completely unaffected by his mate's death, his expression stony.

The sweet smell of lavender pushed away the aura of melancholy, but it didn't dispel the misery in Hazelpaw.

Cats began saying their farewells and condolences, but Hazelpaw and her siblings stayed by their mother's back the whole time, unable to be moved.

Somehow, as Hazelpaw laid there, her eyes fluttered shut and she fell asleep.

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# Chapter Seventeen

***CHAPTER SEVENTEEN***

***ROSELIGHT | WINDCLAN CAMP***

*Roselight sat outside of the* medicine cat den, studying the sky. The air smelled of oncoming rain and soon enough rain was drizzling. Some cats dove under bushes or dens to avoid the rain, but Roselight stayed in her place, welcoming the feel of the cold water running through her fur. It felt like it was cleansing her, ridding her of dread and anxiety.

"You don't want to stay out here," Rowanmask's soft meow pulled her attention to him, "your fever-"

"I don't have a fever." Roselight argued, locking eyes with him.

Rowanmask sat down beside her, ear flicking. "Roselight, I've been a medicine cat longer than you. You think you don't, but you do."

"Well," scoffed Roselight, "all your experience is proving you wrong. I've had a fever before," she shuddered inwardly, "and it is nothing like this."

Rowanmask frowned. "Whatever you say won't change my mind. Also," he seemed hesitant, "you're not coming to the half-moon meeting with me tonight."

"What?" Mistysong's face flashed in her mind. What if she tried to do something to him? They've walked multiple times; she could murder him if she wasn't there!

Lightning flashed, illuminating Rowanmask's apologetic face. That made her rage boil. "Roselight, you need to rest. Staying up all night won't help. I know you're upset that you can't come."

Roselight growled and whipped around, stalking into the

medicine cat den without a word. He couldn't keep her there. She'd come anyway, there was no way he could stop her.

Fuming, she lay down in her nest, listening to the rain intensify outside.

***

It seemed only minutes had passed when Rowanmask announced he was on his way to the half-moon meeting. Roselight gazed after him sourly, nostrils flared. Kestrelheart knew she was also supposed to stay in camp, so her mother was keeping a close eye on her.

Worry and anger stormed inside of her as she waited impatiently, knowing she mustn't leave so soon. If Rowanmask knew she was following him before he got to the Moonpool, he wouldn't hesitate to turn around and escort her back.

*Ashen helped me learn to stalk. I can do it. Especially with the pounding of the rain.* Roselight flicked an ear when a raindrop splashed her nose. *I just have to wait for Kestrelheart to be distracted.* The dark ginger she-cat kept one eye on Kestrelheart. Thankfully, Tulipfoot's kits (who were still learning to walk) hobbled over to Kestrelheart, complaining about the rain but also showing off their walk. Kestrelheart turned to them and that's when Roselight knew the time was right.

Without a second thought, Roselight got up and bounded out of camp, hearing some cat (most likely Kestrelheart) screech at her, but their words were swept away by the wind. She didn't pause or slow down. Narrowing her eyes against the rain, she effortlessly swerved around rabbit holes, only slowing her sprint down when she neared the stream that divided WindClan from ThunderClan. She looked over her shoulder, curious if any cat had followed her. She slid down the slope to the stream, shocked to see the water was much higher than usual. The snowmelt and rain must've made it swell. How did Rowanmask cross this beast without the rocks?

*He must've swam across.* Roselight thought, determined to do the same. She jumped into the rushing water. Whenever her head bobbed underwater, panic and fear coursed through her, but her

head always came back to take a gulp of air. Raw terror was the only thing that pushed her to keep going.

*I am never going to swim again.* Roselight shook her pelt, trying to get rid of as much of the river water as possible. Despite the exhaustion in her muscles, Roselight dashed through the forest, unable to locate Rowanmask's scent trail. *He could be nearby, or I could have already passed him.*

Roselight turned in a full circle, honestly a little lost. Suddenly, cream fur caught her eye. She raced over to a bush where the fur was snagged. If she investigated the fur closer, she saw ginger fur as well.

She pushed through the bush, back into a full-blown sprint. Finally, she tasted Rowanmask's scent, fading quickly due to the rain. She followed his fading scent, adrenaline coursing through her when it gradually became stronger.

*No Mistysong,* her eyes narrowed, *yet.*

Rowanmask's ginger-and-cream pelt was soon visible as he weaved around trees and bushes. Roselight stalked after him, making sure she didn't make too much noise, but the pounding of the rain drowned out her heavy breathing and steps.

Roselight maintained the distance between them, keeping her ears pricked and eyes scanning for Mistysong. Roselight didn't notice they had arrived at the Moonpool until she halted at the edge of the slope. Taking a sharp turn, she padded down the walkway, clearing her throat as she approached Rowanmask, who was engaged in conversation with Softfur.

Softfur looked at her first, her smile gentle. "Greetings, Rosepaw."

Rowanmask whirled around immediately. "Rosepa-light?!"

Roselight raised her muzzle and walked past Rowanmask.

"You're supposed to be at camp." Rowanmask followed her, keeping his voice quiet.

"I'm *supposed* to be." Roselight repeated. "But I'm not. I came for a reason."

"What reason?"

*One, to protect you, which you didn't need.* Roselight thought, but told him the other reason. "To consult with StarClan, obviously."

Rowanmask sighed, turning away and muttering about her being so stubborn.

Roselight marched over to the side of the Moonpool, sitting down beside Puddlecloud. Puddlecloud barely acknowledged her, eyes clouded with concern.

"What's up?" Roselight nudged Puddlecloud.

"Oh, Rosepaw!" Puddlecloud looked at her, tone distressed. "Mintleaf's not well, a-and our herb supply is low, so she's only giving it to the ones who need it more than her. She won't accept any catmint I give her! I've done everything, even hiding it in prey! But she sniffed it out..." the black molly shook her head. "What should I do?"

"Well, first things first, I'm Roselight now."

"Since when? You weren't named last half-moon meeting-"

"Things have happened." It pained her to say those words. So many memories and flashbacks bombarded her mind. "But that's a different story for a different day."

Before Puddlecloud could reply, Tawnythorn's sharp growl sliced through the rain. "Where is Mistysong?"

"Late, it seems." Softfur meowed.

Tawnythorn paced back-and-forth, tail lashing. "That little piece of fox-dung won't come. She knows what would happen."

Puddlecloud and Softfur shared a confused glance, but Roselight knew. Mistysong must've killed one of ShadowClan's warriors.

Rowanmask frowned, skeptical. He had been told of Mistysong's treachery, but he hadn't believed Roselight. "What... what do you mean?"

"She is a murderer who deserves to die. She's caused us so much pain." Tawnythorn snarled.

Softfur let out a gasp. "You must be joking! Mistysong would never kill another cat."

Roselight stepped in. "She tried to kill me. I believe Tawnythorn." Tawnythorn's flaming green eyes rounded with disbelief and horror when Roselight met her eyes. "I don't know what Mistysong's intentions are, but they're not good."

*What are Honeypool's intentions?* That's what she wanted to know as well. All she knew was that he wasn't the good-hearted, understanding deputy he tricked everyone into thinking.

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# Chapter Eighteen

***CHAPTER EIGHTEEN***

***SHELLMOON | SHADOWCLAN CAMP***

*It had been a couple days* ever since Shellmoon earned his warrior name, but he was still in awe. It felt *amazing* to be addressed to as Shellmoon, not Shellpaw. He had thanked Littlewish immediately after the meeting for such an incredible name, but how in the name of StarClan did the suffix 'moon' come to mind? She had said he had two sides like the moon, one very bright and compassionate while the other side was ill-tempered and stubborn. Since when was he stubborn?

Now he sat with a group of warriors, welcoming the sensation of finally being equal to them. Two of them he was friends with as they had been apprentices when he had become one.

"Ugh, can I rant about something to you guys?" Spottedfleck leaned into the semi-circle, her voice now a hush.

"Anything," meowed Dustcloud.

"So I was on patrol with Alderleaf and we decided to hunt together to catch a frog. I circle around the frog while he takes his position, but we didn't go over who'd come out and spook the frog to them, so we both erupted out of our hiding places and the frog ran away from both of us." Spottedfleck's pale green eyes flashed with disdain when she spoke again. "Alderleaf was fuming and I swore he said something about how younger warriors didn't know anything. And I was like, 'It was your fault. The cat who circles around always jumps out,' but he argued with me..." Shellmoon tuned out her gossip, not enjoying the idea of hating on another cat. Alderleaf was a well-respected ShadowClan warrior.

Shellmoon looked up from his paws when he heard Tawnythorn snapping at Snakestar. He saw his sister, Seedpaw, nervously

shuffling her paws behind her mentor.

He decided to talk to her and say goodbye to her before she went to the half-moon meeting.

As he trotted over, he eavesdropped on Snakestar's and Tawnythorn's conversation.

"...have enough reasons to kill her!" Tawnythorn was growling, ears flattened.

"StarClan will frown upon you when you kill a fellow medicine cat." Snakestar mused aloud.

"I'm sure Mistysong wouldn't give a mouse tail for my life." Tawnythorn's face twisted into rage. "Why are you standing up for Mistysong? She killed your former deputy and a warrior!"

*Hollymoon did.* Shellmoon winced whenever cats believed Mistysong killed both. They were wrong. Sure, Mistysong was dangerous, but they wouldn't be wary around Hollymoon.

"Hey, Shellmoon." Seedpaw's mew was quiet when he approached her.

Shellmoon gave his sister a sympathetic look. "What's up?"

"Oh, nothing, besides the fact my mentor wants to get sent to the Dark Forest." Her sarcasm laced her upset tone. "Mistysong will die eventually. Other cats would probably try to get rid of her anyway. Tawnythorn doesn't need to act."

"StarClan would understand why she killed Mistysong. They know what Mistysong has done." Shellmoon desperately tried to get his sister's spirits up, but she only let out a heavy sigh.

"I think I have to go." Seedpaw gaze slid past him, resting on something behind him. "I don't want to face Tawnythorn's temper since she's already in one. A very bad one." The gold-furred she-cat brushed past him, giving him a half-hearted goodbye.

Shellmoon was left with a pit in his stomach, feeling awful his

sister left with her spirits low.

Now that he thought about Mistysong and Hollymoon, and that tom who was exiled, he found it ironic they were all from ThunderClan.

On top of that, Nectarstar seemed reluctant to convict Mistysong of murder. It was also surprising Honeypool was swayed into thinking Mistysong was innocent. He was the type of cat to ask lots of questions to find the truth, but he hadn't stepped in as Shellmoon had hoped.

*Would he let his sister's actions slide because they're kin? Or was he truly manipulated into thinking Mistysong was innocent?* Shellmoon honestly hadn't thought too much about Honeypool, but now something sat wrong inside of him. Honeypool noticed every tiny detail and would've noticed where a cat's story started to backfire on them. It didn't feel right if Honeypool missed a detail. But it also didn't feel right if Honeypool let Mistysong off the hook; he was a good tom and wouldn't let the fact that Mistysong and he were kin stop him from convincing Nectarstar to exile her.

That left him with one choice.

Was Honeypool not the kind, clever tom he believed?

Shellmoon's mind raced back to ThunderClan's camp. He hadn't paid much attention to when Honeypool had whispered to Nectarstar or Mistysong, but now that was majorly suspicious.

*StarClan, my head hurts. I hate playing detective.* Shellmoon stretched his limbs one-by-one. *I'm not even sure I'm onto anything.* A dry laugh rattled in his throat.

The moon was beginning to climb higher into the sky, so Shellmoon decided it was time to retire for the night.

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# Chapter Nineteen

***CHAPTER NINETEEN***

***HAZELPAW | THUNDERCLAN CAMP***

*It was the day after the* half-moon meeting, and the lingering grief never left Hazelpaw. She had brightened up, but whenever someone mentioned death or kin, Hazelpaw couldn't help but flinch and fall silent.

As she ate her piece of prey, she couldn't help but wonder if something that fateful day could've prevented Turtlecreek's death from happening. A different cat could've taken her place... or that fox-hearted rogue just didn't need to exist.

Today was the day, however, that made her shudder. Honeypool was leading a patrol to find the rogue causing all of this trouble and she had been chosen to go. Hadn't he realized this was painful? She didn't want to avenge her mother; it'd just remind her the whole time why she was doing this.

But did the rogue kill Turtlecreek? She was never told the details.

"I wish I was going." Dewpaw murmured, gazing distractedly at the exit of camp. "I'd love to run my claws through that rogue's fur."

Hazelpaw opened her mouth to say she'd gladly give up her position and pass it onto her sister, but Honeypool rounded up the patrol, announcing it was time to go. She was whisked away by Buzzardtuft before she got the chance to tell Dewpaw.

The patrol - consisting of Honeypool, Buzzardtuft, Hollymoon, Echopaw, and herself - hurried out of camp.

"I want Buzzardtuft, Hollymoon, and Echopaw to go check by SkyClan's border. Once you are there, head toward unclaimed territory. Hazelpaw and I will go by WindClan's border and toward

unclaimed territory." Honeypool ordered. Hazelpaw felt honored to go with her deputy, ear tips warming with pride.

Buzzardtuft and the other two left without a word, sprinting off into the forest. Honeypool turned to Hazelpaw, eyes rounding.

"You seem afraid," he noted, slowly leading the way to WindClan's border.

"I am." Hazelpaw murmured, staring at the wet grass beneath her as she padded after him.

"Are you scared to find the rogue?"

Hazelpaw shrugged (although he didn't see it). "I guess so."

"I'll keep you safe, don't worry." Honeypool promised.

Those words alone made Hazelpaw feel better. She had complete faith he'd protect her. As the duo walked toward the border, rain started falling, a soft drizzle at first.

"Let's, uh, hurry this up." Honeypool's jaw was clenched as he started loping. Hazelpaw remembered how much he despised water and stifled a laugh when she remembered Turtlecreek telling her Honeypool had a hard time drinking water, hating how his muzzle got wet.

Hazelpaw dashed after him, her shorter legs struggling to keep up with his fast sprint. An unfamiliar scent tickled her nose, and they both stopped, noses twitching. Hazelpaw unsheathed her claws. It smelled like rogue - very strong. The rogue was around here.

Rustling up ahead caught her attention. Honeypool lowered his body, not quite into a crouch, but he wasn't at his full height. Just as he was about to part the bushes, a cream blur jumped out. Honeypool's reflexes were quick as he sidestepped the ruffled rogue's body. Hazelpaw watched with wide eyes, jaw agape.

"Why are you on ThunderClan territory?" Honeypool challenged, voice level, but underneath it was undisguised hatred.

"Hunting." The cream rogue's yellow eyes trailed over to Hazelpaw. Hazelpaw flattened her ears, letting out the mightiest hiss possible, but it sounded like she was hacking up a hairball. "Why do you care?" The rogue looked back at Honeypool.

*Hunting ThunderClan cats.* Hazelpaw crouched, the waves of terror coming in harder and faster.

Honeypool narrowed his eyes. "This is ThunderClan territory. The prey within our borders are rightfully ours," he slowly unsheathed his claw, "and killing cats is unjust." As quick as a snake, he pounced on her.

Taken by surprise, the skinny rogue collapsed to the ground. Honeypool raised a paw, about to aim for her head, but he faltered, some of the fire fading from his eyes. But his split second of hesitance gave the rogue a chance and she lunged for his throat. Honeypool jumped back, but her paw still sliced his shoulder.

*Get up! Stop watching like some coward!* Hazelpaw slowly rose, legs shaking. She raced over to help her deputy, raising a paw and weakly throwing a blow at the rogue's face. Her slow blow was easily dodged by the rogue and retaliated with a lightning-fast flow, striking Hazelpaw on the nose. Pain blossomed on her nose bridge and Hazelpaw stumbled backward, slightly dazed.

Honeypool shot her a glance, turning back to smack the rogue's chin upward. Hazelpaw rushed back into the fight, battling side-by-side with her deputy. The fight slowly migrated over to the swollen stream that divided ThunderClan from WindClan. Just as Hazelpaw was about to land a hard blow, something crashed into her flank. Pure terror seized the apprentice when she went into the air and above the water.

"Help me!" she caught Honeypool's gaze, but he seemed completely unconcerned.

*That means he'll just come in and help me.* Relief flooded through Hazelpaw, but another thought popped up, sending ice flowing through her veins.

*Unless he was the one who pushed me?*

Everything went dark when her head slammed against something jutting out of the water (presumably a rock).

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# Epilogue

***EPILOGUE***

***HONEYPOOL | WINDCLAN BORDER***

*As Hazelpaw's head dipped under the* choppy waves, he turned away, meeting Egret's burning glare.

"You didn't warn me we were actually going to fight," the skinny she-cat snapped, licking a scratch on her side.

"I had to go back to the Clan with some kind of tussle." Honeypool meowed, pushing down the irritation in his chest. Instead, he flashed a smile at her, ignoring the way his lip wanted to twitch down. "It wouldn't be a believable story if I came back and said Hazelpaw was dead and I was without scratches. Cats who aren't following me would become suspicious."

"Didn't you gloat about more than half of the Clan follows you? What's the problem if a few don't? What will they do?" Egret was now licking her paw and drawing it over her face, scrubbing her cheek.

"Rebel, try to kill me... the possibilities are endless."

"Why don't you kill them?"

Honeypool gazed at her, keeping his smile plastered to his face despite the large urge to drop the act. "I want to give them a chance. I'd like a large group of followers. There's no fun in leading a bunch of cats who'll do your bidding in less than a heartbeat. That's not what I plan to do."

Egret frowned. "Why did you kill that... apprentice, was it?"

Honeypool's smile faltered. It wasn't the question, but the rain was pouring now, soaking his fur.

"I... don't know. She felt like potential trouble in the future, so I decided to get rid of her. She would have probably follow her mother's pawsteps," his lips curled with disgust and he let his charade fall.

"Oh, that other tortoiseshell we killed?" Egret let out a horrible, screechy laugh. "That means that younger one would've been weak as well."

Honeypool stared at Egret, doubtful she'd understand what he meant if he tried to explain.

"Oh, Honeypool, since I have killed so many cats for you, when will I get my prize?" Egret had no trace of leftover amusement in her mew.

Honeypool's lips twitched into a smirk. "Meet me on the night of the full moon right here. Bring every cat in your group, regardless of age."

Egret nodded. "Pleasure doing business with you again, Honeypool."

Honeypool waved her goodbye with his tail. Once she disappeared, Honeypool raced back to camp, shaking his fur out vigorously, padding into Mistysong's den.

"Honeypool," his sister greeted him, eyeing his scratches, "did you let that squirmy apprentice touch you?"

Honeypool let out a dry laugh. "It hurts me that you doubt my skill that much!" he meowed with very little humor, then he turned serious. "Egret hit me."

Mistysong led him over to a nest. "Good. I'd be ashamed to know you were struck by an apprentice."

"Same," agreed Honeypool. His eyes strayed over to a small leaf bundle, lightening with interest. "You got it?"

"Today." Mistysong didn't follow his gaze, already knowing what he spoke of. "Tonight?"

"Tonight."

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# Trivia/Next Book

Like I did last book, I'll tell you guys some facts/opinions and the next book! Let's do this. Before I do the trivia part, I'd like to give two people a shout-out!

SHOUT-OUTS

My first shout-out goes to @Mapleleaf222, who made the spectacular cover! Thank you so much!! (9/23: I rotate hers in and out with other covers made by myself, but still super thankful she took the time to make me one!)

My second shout-out goes to @Dovesong_WC, a great friend and a faithful reader! Also check out her series, Stars and Moon. If you remember this in the last trivia section, her username had originally been Moonshine_Writez.

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TRIVIA

Some POVs are going to switch next book. I won't reveal who is being replaced and who they are being replaced by.

If it wasn't already clear enough, our main antagonist will be - wait, I'll let you guys figure that out. Mistysong or Honeypool? Or perhaps Egret?

This book is called "Crumbling Dawn" because everything - the peace, the light - are crumbling. Hazelpaw's bright future has crumbled. Actually, before I got anything plotted for this series, the book names were titled this (the very first names ever):
1. Shattered
2. Crumbling
3. Cracked
Looking at those, they're in the wrong order, so thank goodness I didn't keep those names. Everything usually crumbles first, then

cracks, then shatters, and I've got no excuse to tell you why little me decided to go with those in that order, but I find it ironic I use "Crumbling Dawn" as the title for the second book when "Crumbling" was its very first title name.

Roselight is still my favorite POV to write and Hazelpaw is still my favorite POV overall. Anyone want to guess Hazelpaw's warrior name? I'll reveal her warrior name next book.

Roselight's name has not always been Roselight. For the longest time I wanted to name her either Roseshine, Rosebreeze, or Rosepond. Roseshine stuck with me the longest and lots of my rough drafts have her name like that. I guess I didn't make too much of a change when I decided Roselight was a beautiful name since -shine and -light are basically the same thing.

Shellmoon was going to be Shellclaw, but that was boring and I like giving main characters cool names.

In a really old rough draft, I remember when Honeypool was the mentor of Hazelpaw. I actually still like that idea and wished I kept it, but this way is also good. Honeypool still would've killed her in a different scenario. That scene would've meant more fighting and since Honeypool was Hazelpaw's mentor, she would've knew his moves. See where I'm going?

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Next Book

Warriors: A Shadow in the Light - Tainted Honey

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started: 3/20/24

finished: 4/24/24

edited: yes (9/21/24-9/23/24)